

GORDON YOUNG "Great Scoundrel"
"The Sea Snatch"—A Novelette—R. H. WATKINS

Short Stories

Twice A Month

March 10th

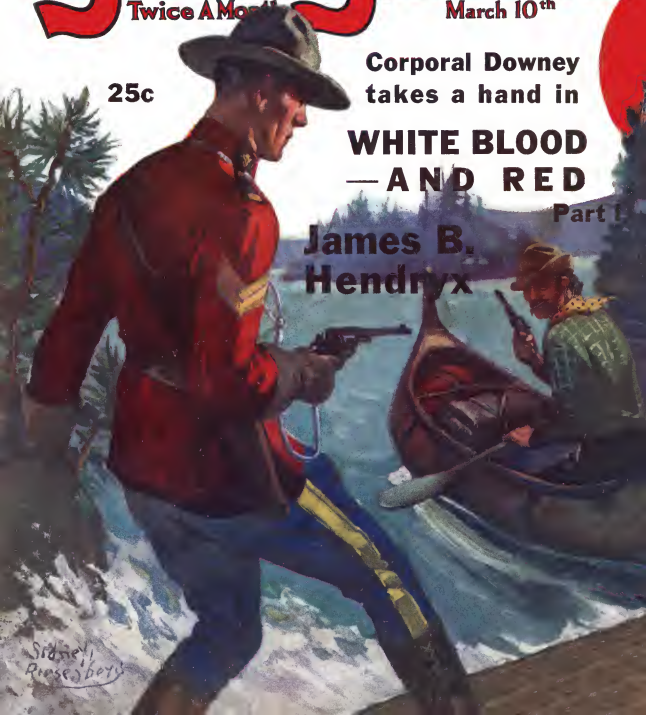
25c

**Corporal Downey
takes a hand in**

**WHITE BLOOD
—AND RED**

Part I

**James B.
Hendryx**



Sidney
Rosenberg



Often the best man—never the groom

EVERY year he watched another of his closest friends get married. He envied them. It was bitter medicine to realize that he was still a bachelor; more than all else he wanted to "settle down." But one by one the girls who had attracted him, quickly dropped him to marry men with far less to offer. Arnold never knew why. That's the insidious thing about halitosis (bad breath): You yourself never know when you have it and the subject is so delicate that even your best friend won't tell you.

No Laughing Matter

People no longer laugh about halitosis. Research has established this offensive condition as being so real, such an everyday threat, that only the ignorant and careless fail to take precautions against it. The fastidious, realizing it is the fault unforgivable, are continually on guard.

A Notable Deodorant

There has always been one *safe* product especially fitted to correct halitosis pleasantly and promptly. Its name is Listerine, and it is the pleasantest tasting, most delectable mouth wash you can use.

Many imitations of it have failed either because they could not do what Listerine does; because they did not meet standard requirements for an antiseptic; or be-

cause they were too strong, too harsh, or too bitter to be tolerated.

Of the imitations that remain, a very large number lack Listerine's speedy action and efficiency.

For more than 50 years, Listerine has been used in hospital work because of its marked deodorant and antiseptic properties. When you rinse your mouth with Listerine Antiseptic here is what happens.

Four Benefits

- (1). Fermentation of tiny food particles (the major cause of breath odors) is instantly halted.
- (2). Decaying matter is swept from large areas on mouth, gum, and tooth surfaces.
- (3). Millions of bacteria capable of causing odors are destroyed outright.
- (4). The breath itself—indeed, the entire mouth—is freshened and sweetened.

Don't Offend Others

When you want such freshening and deodorizing effect without danger, use Listerine Antiseptic. Use it every morning and every night, and between times before business and social engagements, so that you do not offend.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, Mo.

For HALITOSIS use LISTERINE



STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y., and entered 2 class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Y SUBSCRIPTION PRICE—in the United States, Mexico and American Possessions, \$5.00 per year; to Canada, d to all other foreign countries in the Postal Union, \$6.00; price payable in advance, and including postage. 1938. Vol. CLXII, No. 5. Whole Number 773.

OND FOLEY, President; WILLIAM J. DELANEY, Secretary and Treasurer; D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB

I HAVEN'T HAD A RAISE
IN YEARS -- GUESS I
NEVER WILL -- I'M READY
TO GIVE UP

BUCK UP BILL, WHY NOT
TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S
GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S
MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT -- I'M NOT
GETTING ANYWHERE. I
OUGHT TO TRY A NEW
FIELD TO MAKE
MORE MONEY

LOOK AT THIS -- RADIO IS CERTAINLY
GROWING FAST -- AND THE
NATIONAL RADIO
INSTITUTE SAYS THEY
TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO
RIGHT AT HOME
IN SPARE TIME

I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN
RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL
SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON
FREE. GUESS I'LL
MAIL THE COUPON
AND LOOK INTO
THIS

Find out how practical it is to Train at Home for a Good RADIO Job I'll send a sample lesson FREE



J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

FREE. Examine it, read it, see how easy
it is to understand even if you've never
had any technical experience or training.

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ en-
gineers, operators, station managers and
pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio
set servicing pays as much as \$200 to
\$500 a year. Full time Radio servicing
jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.
Many Radio Experts own and operate
their own full time or part time Radio
sales and service businesses. Radio manu-
facturers and jobbers employ testers, in-
spectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen
paying up to \$8,000 a year. Radio opera-
tors on ships get good pay, see the world
besides. Automobile, police, aviation, com-
mercial Radio, loud speaker systems of-
fer good opportunities now and for the
future. Training promises many good jobs
soon. Men I trained are holding good jobs
in all these branches of Radio.

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Almost every neighborhood needs a good
spare time serviceman. The day you enroll
I start sending you Extra Money Job
Sheets. They show you how to do Radio
repair jobs; how to cash in quickly.
Throughout your training I send you plans
and ideas that have made good spare time
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of fellows. I send you special Radio equip-

ment; show you how to conduct experi-
ments, build circuits illustrating impor-
tant Radio principles. My training gives
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fellow over 16 years old. My book points
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portunities and those coming in Television;
tells about my Training in Radio and
Television; shows my Money Back Agree-
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Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL
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it on a penny postcard--NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 6CM
Washington, D. C.

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FREE BOOK
HAS HELPED
HUNDREDS OF
MEN MAKE
MORE MONEY



YOU SURELY KNOW
RADIO. MINE
NEVER SOUNDED
BETTER

THANKS, I'VE BEEN STUDYING
ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND
I'M ALREADY MAKING
MONEY IN
MY SPARE
TIME. THAT'S
\$10 EXTRA
THIS WEEK



OH BILL, I'M SO GLAD
YOU SENT FOR THAT
FREE LESSON AND
PROVED TO YOUR-
SELF THAT YOU
COULD LEARN
RADIO AT HOME

YES, I HAVE A GOOD
FULL TIME RADIO
JOB NOW-- AND A
BRIGHT FUTURE
AHEAD IN RADIO



J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6CM
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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Over 350 more men and women are needed at once to open fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. A wonderful chance to make as high as \$60.00 in a week, *starting at once*. No past experience needed. This company will send you everything you need and give you all the help you require. You risk no money. Mail this application if you want to know whether your own or nearby locality is open. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan.

①

**Write Your
Full Name
and Address
Here**

Name -----
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address -----

City and State -----

②

**How Much
Time Can You
Devote to
Coffee Agency?**

Mark with an "X"
☐ FULL TIME; ☐ PART TIME

[Full time pays up to \$35 to \$60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to \$25.50 in a week.]

③

**State Which
Bonus You
Prefer—Cash
or Ford
Automobile**

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of \$500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ \$500.00 CASH BONUS; ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN

④

**Can You
Start at Once?**

Mark with an "X"
☐ YES; ☐ NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

**All
Applications
Will Be Held
Strictly
Confidential**

SEND NO MONEY

No money fee is required with this application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. There's no obligation. You will be notified by return mail whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. Those who apply first will be given preference, so mail your Application without delay. No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once—NOW!

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Wonderful Treatment for Pile Suffering

The painful, itching, bleeding, protruding and discomforting symptoms of piles may now be treated at home, privately and conveniently. Thousands are enthusiastic about this amazing Combination Treatment; read the statement below:



"I had bleeding and protruding piles for over twenty-seven years; and at last I got so bad I could hardly walk, and thought I was ready for the knife, when I tried your treatment, and thank God I did. Sincerely, R. M. Wallenburg, 225 Commerce Ave., S. W., Grand Rapids, Mich.

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Salesmen and Distributors are cashing in Big with Ovrhaul—it is so revolutionary—so positive in its action—so new and different and saves the motorist so much money—that representatives say OVRHAUL is the quickest seller and biggest profit-maker they have had in years. Not a gasoline dope, nor gadget. Does not contain graphite or harmful abrasives. 18 million car owners need Ovrhaul. If you want in on this, send the coupon opposite and let me help you. I built a sales organization that sold over a million automobile tires and tubes. Ovrhaul has proved the greatest possibilities for big business of anything I have ever seen. Desirable exclusive territories open. Start today by mailing the coupon for Free Sample. Air mail reaches us overnight from the East.

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“We hereby certify that we have tested OVRHAUL in our Working Compressions—1928 Pontiac drives 12,000 miles. Total gain in compression of the (nearly normal) according to manufacturer’s specifications. Ovrhaul does not scratch, abrade or otherwise injure the motor. The “tick”-up, speed and hill climbing performance were increased noticeably. Our runs practically as well as when new.”

Industrial Testing Laboratory, Inc.

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OVRHAUL CO.
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B. L. Mellinger, Pres.
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Address.....
City..... State.....

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This combination Training (Radio and Refrigeration) can be of great value to you. Whether you go into business for yourself or get a job working for a Radio Sales and Service organization, the fact that you are trained in servicing Electric Refrigerators will be profitable to you. Many Radio Manufacturers also make Electric Refrigerators and men with this combination training are much more valuable to these employers. You can NOW get this training without extra cost.

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Name.....
Address.....
City..... State.....

BIGGEST AND BEST—ACTION



Short

TWICE A MONTH

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TUTTLE makes news—always—for **SHORT STORIES** readers. So there is news in the fact that in our next issue there will be a full length, regular Tuttle tale of our old friends, Sad Sontag and his side kick, Swede Harrigan. The story came to us with a letter on the stationery of the "Pacific Coast Baseball League, Office of W. C. Tuttle, President, Los Angeles." We can't help looking a little askance at that letter-head, because it is our particular hunch that it is one of the reasons that often the fans have to cry in vain for Tuttle and more Tuttle; Tut is so busy with his southpaws and his team's summer plans that he doesn't get down to his regular business of pounding a typewriter. But so long as we have this grand Sontag story to bring to those fans in the next issue, I suppose we can't grumble too much. And incidentally, speaking of southpaws, Tut writes that Bud—a young one of the Tuttle tribe—is one. Bud has been pitcher with the San Diego baseball club for two seasons, but his father comments that he does everything else right-handed. We know he writes that way, because haven't we had some

"Gene Van" stories in **SHORT STORIES**. And who else is that but young Mr. Tuttle?

* * * * *

There is an interesting story of the coal mining regions in the next issue, and it is written by a newcomer to **SS**—Baynard Kendrick. The author writes that he spent most of last winter in the soft coal regions of West Virginia, not for local color, but to find a quiet spot to finish a mystery story he was writing. He found not only that, but some interesting lights on underground life as well, which he used to make a story. Don't miss it.

* * * * *

Patrick O'Keefe, who sends us a story every now and then from various foreign ports which he touches as ship's radio operator, will have one in our next issue. It is called "Island Occupied," and O'Keefe writes that his story is based on an island that actually exists in the Caribbean—the hurricane season sees it occupied, and otherwise not. In this case the tough guys thought it was unoccupied and it wasn't. Honeymooners—of all things—were in residence!

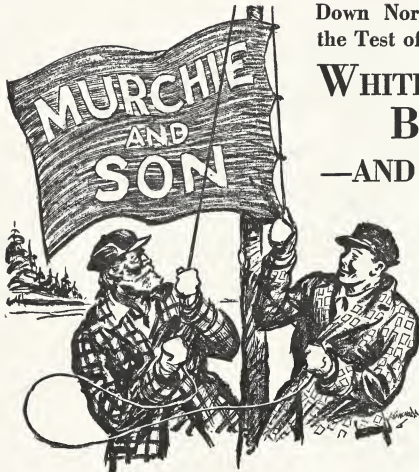


Coming up in the next issue

Down North Came
the Test of—

WHITE BLOOD —AND RED

PART I



*A Man of the North Who Was Worth Any Two Men on a
Portage, and Any Five Men in a Fight*

CHAPTER I

A FRIENDSHIP IS SHATTERED

THE deep voice of Duncan McPherson, the factor at Fort Chipewyan, boomed a welcome to the big man who stood framed in the doorway of the trading room. "Come in, Colin Murchie! An' how's things on the Ptarmigan? 'Tis a long time I've no seen ye."

"Aye, 'tis three year, come fall," replied the other, advancing into the room and seating himself on the counter. "I mind 'twas at the mission of Father Giroux I seen ye last. 'Twas the last year Angus was i' the school."

"Aye, an' the last for my Jean. The next year I put her in a convent in Montreal."

"Losh, Duncan McPherson! An' why would ye be lockin' the lass in a convent, when she'd one day make a good wife for some man i' the outlands? Time'll come when Angus'll be wantin' a wife, mayhap."

"Aye, an' Jean could go further an' fare worse. But 'tis not that she would take the veil an' become a sister, or whatnot. 'Tis only that she can get education beyond what they teach at the mission."

"An' what good will it do when she gets it? Father Giroux is a fine man. No

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of

"Midnight—in the Full of the Moon," "Lady Luck and the Doctor," etc.



better ever set foot i' the outlands. But havin' book learnin' himsel', he thinks others should ha' it also.

"Father Giroux has been wantin' Angus should go to some university in Montreal, or Toronto."

"He's a likely lad—young Angus. For two year now I have watched him come an' go on the river. This year McDonald made him boss scowman for the brigade. He's worth any two men on a portage—an' any five in a fight. A good head on strong shoulders—ye may well be proud o' him, Colin Murchie. But mebbe ye're not doin' the best for the lad by holdin' him here i' the outlands."

"I'm not holdin' him. He'll be twenty-one, an' his own man, come August. When he returns from downriver, I'll be offerin' him a full partnership on the

Ptarmigan. If he wants to go to a college, he's welcome. 'Tis my job to fit him for the life o' a fur trader, an' to that end I have kept him in the bush, an' on the rivers."

A CACKLING laugh issued from the tobacco-stained white beard of an oldster who had sat unnoticed in a chair tilted back against a row of barrels. "Fur trader—hell! Whyn't he go prospectin'? You s'pose I'd waste my time tradin' sugar, an' tea, an' blankets to the damn Injuns fer a lot of stinkin' pelts, when any day I'm liable to strike the mother lode?"

"Toosh, ye crack-pot!" exclaimed McPherson, with a contemptuous glance at the oldster. "Ye talk o' wastin' your time—how many years have ye been peckin'

about amongst the rocks? An' what have ye got to show for it?"

"You won't be callin' me crack-pot when I strike the mother lode," retorted the old man in a high, brittle voice. "Better'n fifty year I been huntin' it—an' now I know where it's at. Couple o' months, now, an' I'll be into the gold, right where she starts. I've panned plenty of placer stuff, an' I know where I can pan more. But I wouldn't stop to fool with it. It ain't nothin' but float. It's the mother lode I'm after. I found oil, too—long before the Tar Sands Company know'd they was oil in the country. I know a place where it sjudges out of the mud on the edge of a slough. But I wouldn't fool with that, neither. It's dirty, an' sticky, an' it stinks. Gold's bright, an' it's clean."

"Ye make light o' oil, an' placer gold, an' fur," retorted McPherson, "an' yet ye fetched in a few pelts to trade for what little grub'll run ye a couple o' months, at the most. An' I took pity on ye, or I couldn't have give ye that much."

"Shore I fetched in some pelts to trade fer grub. I've traded placer gold fer it, too. A man's got to eat an' keep goin' till he strikes the mother lode, ain't he? You jest wait a couple of months, now, an' I'll be into it—an' then I'll sell out fer millions."

"Millions, I say—an' it'll all be mine to do as I dang please with it. You know what I'm goin' to do when I get all them millions? I'm goin' to git to hell outa this damn country, an' I ain't never goin' to paddle no canoe agin—an' I ain't never goin' to drive no dogs, either. Nussir, I ain't a-goin' to ride on nothin' littler'n a steamboat. An' I'm a-goin' to drive horses. I'm a-goin' to New York, an' London, an' Paris—an' I'll git me a shave, an' a white suit, an' another one, too. An' I'll ride up an' down the streets, an' all the folks'll look, an' the women, too, an' they'll say, 'There goes Old Man Winnie that found the mother lode.' An' if I

want to, I'll hire me a hack, an' make the feller go wherever I tell him to, an' I'll set inside an' look out the winder."

Colin Murchie grinned tolerantly. "But ye'll remember, Winnie, ye ain't been out the bush i' fifty year."

"Yer damn right, I ain't," piped the oldster, "but I'm a-goin' out this year—shore. An' when I hit them big towns the folks is all goin' to take notice!"

"I have no doubt ye're right," grinned McPherson, and turned to Murchie. "How about a wee tippie, Colin?" Don't tell me ye're not dry."

"I wouldn't tell ye a thing like that, an' expect ye to believe me. Fetch out the jug, an' I'll give the lie to the thought."

Old Man Winnie rose from his chair with alacrity and approached the counter as McPherson produced a jug and three glasses.

MURCHIE raised a glass well filled with the amber liquor. "Here's to yer good health, Duncan," he said. "Ye're holdin' up well, for an old man."

"Old man! Look at the gray in yer own beard, Colin Murchie, before ye talk of others gittin' old!"

"Humph—'tis only a white hair, here an' there. I'm as good a man as I ever was."

"Aye—mebbe. An' I'd be better if once I could get rid of the damn gout."

"'Tis a sign o' age, an' high livin'," opined Murchie. "If ye had a tradin' post o' yer own, Duncan, ye'd have no time to get the gout."

"Ye're an older man than me, an' ought to know," countered McPherson. "But as for high livin', losh, mon—I handle ten times the fur ye do in a year's time!"

"Aye—mebbe. But on the fur I handle on the Ptarmigan, the profits is mine."

"An' the losses, too—don't forget the losses, Colin."

"I haven't met with any losses yet. Though I'll admit that the last few years has been bad."

"It's the damn free-traders," opined McPherson.

"I'm a free-trader. mysel'," reminded Murchie.



"Aye, but ye have yer own post, an' ye refuse to trade liquor. I was thinkin' more o' the hooch-runners, like Jacques Larue."

At the name, Old Man Winnie started to chuckle. "He, he, he," I don't blame ye for not likin' Jacques Larue. He's been over on Lake o' the Wind."

"Lake o' the Wind!" cried both traders in unison.

"Shore. That's where I located the mother lode—in them high hills on the west side."

"The Lake o' the Wind Injuns'll not be tradin' with Jacques Larue," opined McPherson. "Old Miqua'll fetch his fur here, an' the others'll follow."

"Fetch his fur here!" cried Murchie.

"Ha, ha—ye poor fool! Miqua an' his band will trade with me this winter. Ye'll wait an' see!"

"You'll both wait long to see Miqua again," taunted Old Man Winnie, a knowing leer in his watery eyes. "An' you'll be gittin' no fur off'n the Lake o' the Wind Injuns, neither. Jacques Larue has got their fur a'ready."

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Murchie, scowling at the old prospector. "Has yon whusky-peddlin' spawn o' the devil been tamperin' with the Lake o' the Wind natives? Speak out what ye know, if anything, instead o' standin' there chucklin' like the silly dolt ye are!"

"He, he, he! Miqua's dead, an' his Injuns has traded with Jacques Larue."

"Dead!"

"Shore, he's dead. They drowned him. I seen 'em do it. They didn't know I seen 'em. I was up in the rocks on the west side—where the mother lode is—"

"Damn yer mother lode!" cried McPherson. "Tell us about Miqua! Ye said ye seen 'em drown him. Who done it—an' why?"

"**I**T WAS Paul Blind Man, an' the Big Bear done it. When Miqua went out to lift his net they paddled clost an' tipped



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his canoe over, an' then they paddled ashore an' left Miqua out there to drown. Larue was waitin' fer 'em in the bush at the edge of the lake, an' when they come ashore Miqua had quit splashin' around, an' had sunk—an' Larue give 'em a jug. Then he hung 'round an' traded, an' got their fur, an' they was all drunk."

"Man—can ye swear it?" demanded Murchie.

"Shore. I can swear the mother lode's in them rocks on the west side. There's a quartz outcrop there—"

"Foosh—with yer mother lodes an' yer outcrops! Ye daftie! Can ye not swear Larue was waitin' for 'em an' give 'em a jug?"

"You don't believe the mother lode's in them rocks, eh? I'll show you! You won't be callin' me no daftie a couple of months from now. You wait an' see."

McPherson's Indian cook thrust her head into the room to announce supper, and the three adjourned to the dining room where, all through the meal, both traders tried in vain to extract further information from the oldster, whose warped brain refused to be diverted from its one and only thought — the mother lode. Piqued at the persistent questioning of the two, when the meal was finished, Old Man Winnie retired sullenly to his tent, leaving the Scots to argue and bicker until far into the night.

NEXT morning Corporal Downey arrived on a routine patrol from up-river, and listened while the two repeated the tale Old Man Winnie had told them the night before. The officer nodded thoughtfully.

"It ain't the first murder I've suspected Larue of havin' a hand in," he said. "But so far, I've never been able to get proof. We know he's been peddlin' hooch fer years—but we've never been able to make the charge stick. He's smart, all right—but there ain't no man smart enough to keep on committin' crimes forever. He's

bound to slip up sometime—an' maybe this is the time. I'll have a talk with Old Man Winnie, an' then I'll swing around by Lake o' the Wind. The men from this detachment can't handle it, what with Sergeant Blake laid up with a broken leg, an' Constable Jones with the flu."

An hour's patient questioning failed to elicit any further information from the oldster, who rambled on about the mother lode, and what he would do with the millions he was going to receive from the sale of it. Finally Downey gave it up, and when he pulled out for Lake o' the Wind, Old Man Winnie accompanied him.

Left to themselves, the two old Scots resumed their tippling and arguing. Opening the iron safe, McPherson withdrew a single silver fox skin which he handed to Murchie for inspection.

"'Tis one I wouldn't trust in the fur loft with the rest," he confided. "An' how would ye like to have a solid pack like that one, Colin Murchie?"

The big man fondled the pelt with the reverence of one who knows fur, holding it this way and that to catch the tiny glints of light that flashed from the beautifully silvered hairs. "Where'd ye get the likes of this?" he asked, as he gently stroked the fur with his fingers.

"From Wahteno, the Yellowknife."

"Wahteno! D'ye mean ye traded with Wahteno, when well ye know he's owin' me debt he has not paid the past two years? 'Tis a fine friend ye are, McPherson, after we refusin' a dozen different times to trade with the Chipewyans, when I knowed they owed ye debt! I sent 'em here to trade."

"I just took the one peltie," explained McPherson, striving to mollify the irate trader. "He had other fur. I sent him to ye with the rest."

"But ye took the pick! Ye took a pelt the like o' which a trader handles mebbe once in a lifetime — an' ye left me the ruck! An' he never even come to me with that. His debt's not paid yet!!"

"That's no fault o' mine," defended McPherson. "I told him to go to ye. He left here with his fur—though I did hear, later, that he traded it to Jacques Larue for whiskey."

"Aye — the worthless no 'count scut! But that does not clear yer skirts, Duncan McPherson! Ye traded with an Injun ye knowed was in debt to me!"

"Listen, Colin—"

"Don't Colin me! To the likes o' ye, I'm Misther Murchie!"

"'Twas but the one pelt—an' 'twas by way of getting back at ye for the time ye stopped an Injun on the river, when ye well knew he was headin' for here to trade—an' ye traded him out of a pelt as good as this one. D'ye mind that time, Colin Murchie?"

"Aye—but 'twas not a like case—an' well ye know it! That Injun was a Swampy Cree. He was not in yer debt—an' was like to trade anywhere. 'Twas fair tradin'."

"'Twas not overly fair—an' him head-in' for here—an' ye know it."

"'Twas fair enough. 'Twas no under-handed trick like ye played on me. 'Tis little better than a thief ye are, Duncan McPherson! I'm done with ye! D'ye hear—I'm done with ye for all time!" With which wrathful denunciation, the big man slammed the pelt onto the counter, and strode from the room. Nor did he give so much as a backward glance as he righted his canoe and, stepping into it, headed downriver.

CHAPTER II

CORPORAL DOWNEY INVESTIGATES

DRIPPING down the Riviere-des-Roches for a short distance below Fort Chipewyan, Old Man Winnie, who had volunteered to guide Corporal Downey into the Lake o' the Wind country, headed up a snye, or false channel, and so into a small nameless river whose ascent was an alternation of interminable windings

through flat spruce swamps, and short rough portages where the water plunged over rock dikes, or dashed in seething fury against the rocks of the numerous rapids.

On the afternoon of the second day, they left the river and proceeded by a series of small lakes and portages toward a long line of hills that showed blue-gray in the distance. It was in these hills the oldster assured Downey, he had at last found the mother lode.

"How do you know it's the mother lode?" asked the officer, as they stretched out beside the fire in the evening.

"How do I know it? Cripes I seen it! A vein of quartz damn near two foot thick, an' she outcrops purty high up, right on the west shore of the Lake o' the Wind."

"But you've prospected a long time. You must have run onto plenty of quartz outcroppings before."

"Shore I have—dozens of 'em—mebbe hundreds. But they wasn't none of 'em the mother lode."

"How do you know this one is?"

"It stands to reason — that's how! Cripes, the mother lode's bound to be some place, ain't it? An' if it ain't nowhere else, it must be there. I got some of it shot down. But it's slow work—drillin' all alone. I figger she dips, back in the hill a ways. An' that's where I'll strike it. I kin shoot into there in a couple of months time—if my giant holds out."

"What if it don't hold out?"

"I'll git some more, then. Hell, I been shootin' veins an' gittin' more giant fer better'n fifty year. I ought to know how to go at it."

"You sure ought," agreed Downey. "But if you had a pardner it wouldn't be so slow."

"What—me work like a dog, an' starve, an' freeze for fifty year, an' then jest when I've found the mother lode, take on some pardner to divide up all them millions with! You must think I'm crazy!"

"Ain't you never thought you had the mother lode before?"

"Oh, shore—plenty of times—mebbe a hundred, or more. But I was wrong them times. That's how I know I'm right, this time. It stands to reason a man can't be wrong only so many times, an' then he's bound to be right. An' it stands to reason that he's bound to find the mother lode the last time he tries—'cause when he finds it, he ain't a-goin' to try no more. Well—this here's the last time I've tried, ain't it? So it's bound to be the mother lode."

"*Good night!*" breathed Corporal Downey. "Don't you never get discouraged?"

"Who—me? Cripes, I should say not! If I'd of got discouraged I wouldn't never of found the mother lode, would I? Hell—I knowed I'd strike it sometime if I kep' on huntin'. An' I was right. A man don't want to be in no hurry, if he's huntin' the mother lode."

"I guess that's right," agreed Downey. "An' you was there by this outcrop when you seen Miqua git drowned?"

"**S**HORE I was. I'd jest finished drillin' a hole, an' I set down fer to take a smoke, an' I looked down to the lake an' seen Miqua tendin' his net. Then I seen this other canoe shove out from



shore an' paddle over to Miqua, an' I seen it was Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear in it, an' I thought it was funny if they'd be helpin' Miqua."

"Why?"

"'Cause Miqua was a kind of chief of

that band of Crees, an' the others mostly done like he said. I was down to their camp the day before, which it's on a p'int a little ways north of my camp, an' that was the day Larue come along an' wanted to trade 'em some lickin' fer fur. But Miqua told 'em not to trade with Larue—not fer his lickin', nor his other stuff, neither."

"Larue had some other trade goods along, did he?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't nothin' but junk, like most of them free traders sells. An' Miqua told Larue if he sold any lickin' to anyone in the camp, he'd tell the police. An' Larue said he wouldn't—but he sold some to Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear jest the same."

"Did you see him sell it?"

"No, but they was both kind of drunk, that day—an' next mornin' I heard 'em quarrelin' with Miqua."

"That was the day that Miqua was drowned?"

"Yeah—it was 'long about noon, they done it."

"How many natives were camped on the point?"

"Oh mebbe fifty, sixty, countin' the young-uns. I never counted 'em."

"Now, you say you seen Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear paddle out to Miqua where he was lookin' at his net—what happened then?"

"Well, like I said, I was settin' there takin' a smoke an' a-watchin' Miqua tendin' his net, an' I seen this canoe shove off from shore—"

"From the camp of the Injuns?"

"No, from down the other way—south of where I was settin'. An' when I seen who was in it, I thought it was funny if they'd be helpin' Miqua with his net. So I kep' on a-watchin' 'em, an' I seen 'em paddle right up agin' his canoe, an' Paul Blind Man give Miqua a shove, an' the Big Bear reached out an' tipped his canoe over, an' then they paddled away as fast as they could—back where they come

from. Miqua, he splattered around an' a-grabbin' at the canoe, but it seemed like he couldn't git hold of it, an' pretty soon he sunk. An' jest then I seen Larue standin' on a rock watchin' Miqua, too. An' then the two in the canoe landed where Larue was, an' I seen him pass 'em a jug."

"If you seen all that so plain, how was it the Injuns couldn't see it from the camp?"

"'Count of an island bein' in the road. Miqua had his net set in behind the island—south of it—an' the camp lays north. They couldn't see nothin' from the camp—couldn't even see them two shove off from shore, an' couldn't see Larue where he stood on that flat rock. I guess that's why they went there—Larue prob'ly figgered it out."

"Do the other Injuns suspect Miqua was murdered?"

"No, leastwise, I don't figger they do. They can't none of 'em talk English except Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear—they both worked on the river. Miqua, he could talk a little—an' his woman, too, but the rest of 'em can't talk nothin' but Injun."

"**W**HEN did they find out that Miqua was dead?"

"Well they was an offshore wind an' pretty quick Miqua's canoe drifted around the p'int of the island, headin' out in the lake. An' I guess some of them in the camp seen it driftin' along upside down, 'cause all to onct they was all hollerin' an' runnin' up an' down, an' p'intin' at it, an' then a lot of canoes shoved off an' paddled out there, an' after while they come back fetchin' Miqua's canoe with 'em."

"Did you go down to the camp?"

"Oh, shore, they was all raisin' hell down there an' howlin' an' hollerin', so I went down."

"Did you talk to Miqua's wife? Does she think it was an accident?"

"Yeah—what little she kin talk. They

all think it was an accident. If she don't, she never let on."

"Did Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear come back to the camp?"

"In a little while they did. An' Larue, too. They claimed they was down to Larue's camp, an' they heard the rookus, so they come up to find out what was the matter."

"Did they find Miqua's body?"

"Yeah, the next day they did—when they went out an' lifted Miqua's net they found him ketched in it. So they fetched him ashore an' buried him there on the p'int."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"'Bout a week. I was low on grub, an' I hit out fer Chipewyan the day they found him—an' it took me three days to fetch the Fort, an' I stayed there two full days, an' this is two days we been comin' in."

"Was Larue still on Lake o' the Wind when you left?"

"Shore, he was. Hell, he'll stay there till he gits all their fur. He had the most of it 'fore I come away. When they know'd Miqua was dead they begun to trade with Larue, fer lickin' an' goods. Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear, they're the bosses, now—an' they don't give a damn about the rest of the Injuns, jest so they git all the lickin' they want."

Corporal Downey sat for a long time staring into the little fire. Finally he spoke. "If Larue's still on Lake o' the Wind, I've got a chance of gittin' him cold fer sellin' liquor in possession in prohibited territory. The murder'll be harder. Anyways, I've got a *corpus delicti*."

"You've got a which?"

"I'll have Miqua's body where I kin produce it, to show that he's dead."

"Cripes—anyone with any sense would know he was dead if he laid out there in the lake all night ketched in a fish net!"

"That's right," grinned Downey. "Mebbe even a jury could figure that out. Of

course, Larue an' them Injuns, Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear ain't goin' to talk—an' what talkin' they do will be lies. The case will rest squarely on your testimony."

"On my which?"

"On what you tell the judge an' the jury at the trial. If you go down there to Edmonton an' tell 'em jest what you've told me, there's a good chance that the jury will believe you."

"But I ain't goin' to Edmonton. I ain't got no time to. I want to git into the mother lode agin snow flies. I'm kinda tired of winterin' in this damn country. I'm a-goin' to New York an' London, an' Paris, an' begin spendin' my money. I ain't so young as I used to be no more—an' what with all them millions I'll have, I won't never git 'em spent unlesst I hurry up an' git at it."

"That's right," Downey tactfully agreed, "but Miqua was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Oh, shore—Miqua was all right."

"Well—wouldn't you like to see his murderers hanged?"

"Yeah, it would look all right—I'd kinda like to see it."

"Wouldn't you like to help hang 'em?"

"Oh, shore—I'd help—if I was there, an' the ones that hung 'em was short-handed."

"I mean, wouldn't you be willin' to go on the witness stand in court an' tell what you seen."

"Nope—I ain't got no time to fool around with no courts. I'm too busy."

Downey smiled tolerantly. "Listen, Winnie, when the time comes all I want you to do is to come down to Edmonton an' tell 'em what you told me about seein' them two Injuns tip Miqua's canoe over an' leave him there to drown, an' that Larue stood there lookin' on, an' then passed 'em a jug. Will you do that, as a favor to me?"

The old man pondered the proposition. Finally he spoke. "You're a good fella, Downey—everyone knows that—an' I

wouldn't mind doin' you a good turn. But it's like this—I got to stick right here till I git into the mother lode. It won't only be a couple of months—er mebbe three. After I sell out an' git my millions an' git out of this damn country, so I won't never have to come back here no more—then I'll go to court fer you an' tell 'em jest what I seen. But 'long as I've got to stay in this country I ain't goin' to talk no more than a fish. "'Cause Larue an' them two Injuns would do me like they done Miqua—an' don't you fergit it!"

"But if I arrest the three of 'em an' hold 'em in jail till the trial, an' then they git convicted an' hanged, they couldn't never do nothin' to you."

"No—mebbe not," agreed the oldster. "But you got to remember that there's goin' to be three of them claimin' they didn't kill Miqua, to only me claimin' they did—an' s'pose the damn fool jury would believe them three? They'd git turned loose, an' they'd hit right back here to Lake o' the Wind—an' then where'd I be at?"

Nussir—I've worked long an' hard to find the mother lode, an' I figger I'd be a damn fool to go an' git killed jest when I'd found it. The best I kin do is jest like I said—when I git my millions, so I don't have to come back here no more, then I'll go to court an' tell 'em what I seen."

"Of course," replied Downey, "you know I could arrest you an' hold you in the Fort Saskatchewan jail till the trial, as a material witness?"

"Nope. I ain't done nothin' but mind my own business, an' you can't put a man in jail fer that. But even if you did, it wouldn't do you no good, 'cause I'd be mad, an' I wouldn't tell 'em a damn thing—less'n it was a bunch of lies, so them three would figger I was on their side."

"I guess," said Corporal Downey, with a wry grin, "my murder case would fall through. But I'm goin' on in there an' try to pin some kind of a liquor charge on Larue."

"SHORE, you go ahead an' do that—but don't git me mixed up in it. I don't know nothin' about nothin'. But I do know that Larue would kill a man that helped the police git him on a licker case jest as quick as he would fer murder. I ain't even goin' along with you to Lake o' the Wind. Larue might be there an' he might figger I fetched you in—an' if he's gone, Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear would be there, an' they'd figger the same way. I'm goin' to stay out here along this crick an' hunt me some meat. They's too many Injuns huntin' around the lake, an' the moose is all scairt. You kin git along without me, now. You can't miss the lake—it lays jest behind that highest peak. If Larue's gone, an' you want to foller him, go down to the end of that deep bay on the south side of the lake, an' portage acrost the ridge—you'll find a trail there—an' that lets you onto Fishin' River that empties into Lake Athabasca. That's the way Larue come in, an' it's prob'ly the way he'll go out with his fur. I'm goin' to hang around here three, four days, an' when I git back there I'll tell them Injuns I never even seen you."

The following morning as Corporal Downey pulled out for Lake o' the Wind, the oldster thrust out his hand. "Well, so long, Co'pral—an' good luck. An' don't fergit—you kin count on me. Jest as soon as I git my millions fer the mother lode, you holler, I'll be in New York, er London, er Paris—but I'll come hell a-whoop-in', an' we'll hang them three damn cusses so high the crows can't find 'em."

"All right," grinned Downey, shaking the talon-like hand. "I won't fergit. I'll be countin' on you."

CHAPTER III

ANGUS MURCHIE MAKES A PROMISE

EARLY in August young Angus Murchie stepped ashore in front of his father's trading post on the Ptarmigan, drew his canoe from the water, overturned

it, and straightened up to allow his gaze to rest for a moment on the flag that floated proudly from its staff. In letters of white blazoned against a crimson field he read the single word:

MURCHIE

Then his gaze shifted to the canyon a few yards upstream where the Ptarmigan thundered down through a rock-studded gorge in a smother of seething whitewater that dashed spray high against the sides and sent a gauzy column of mist rising higher even than the towering rock walls.

As the late afternoon sunlight, striking aslant the column of mist, resolved into rainbow colors, the lad's heart swelled almost to bursting within his breast. This was home! Always there had been the rainbow in the column of rising mist—always the roar of the rapid. And always the rough, frowning rock walls, and the dark green vista of spruce with its spires like spear points reaching into the sky. And always the nearer, more comforting sound as the released water purled softly past the landing, its surface flecked and splotted with the foam of the roaring rapid. And the flag—and the long, low, log trading post, with the living quarters in the rear—all just as it had been since he could first remember.

Home—but there was one void that never would be filled. The lad swallowed the growing lump in his throat and instinctively his eyes rose to the sodded mound that showed on the verge of the transverse rock dike—the grave of his Indian mother, sleeping her eternal sleep high above the roar of her river. Then they shifted to the gnarled bole of the banksian tree that stood within arm's reach of him, close beside the river. It was in the shade of this tree that she used to sit during the long warm hours of summer, her deft fingers plying her needle in the fashioning of garments, or in stitching beads in bright patterns on his tiny moccasins and soft fawn-skin leggins. And it

was here he used to run to her when play had tired his wee body, and she would lay aside her needlework and gather him into her lap and croon softly to him until his eyes grew heavy with sleep, and the rain-bow mist, and the mighty roar of the



rapid, and the soft crooning voice blended into oblivion.

He turned at the sound of a deep, booming voice, to see Colin Murchie standing in the door of the trading room. Welcome home, lad! I was afraid ye'd not be makin' it in time."

"Father Giroux told me you hoped I'd be here by the seventh. So when I got to McMurray I quit the outfit, and came on here. This is the sixth, isn't it?"

"Aye, 'tis the sixth. But I hope ye didn't leave him shorthanded by quittin'. A man should stay with a job till it's done."

"No, I told McDonald you wanted me by the seventh, and he let me go."

"Duncan McPherson told me McDonald had made ye boss scowman," said the older man, a touch of pride in his voice.

"Yes, he doubled my wages, and wanted me to promise to take the brigade down next summer."

"An' did ye promise him?"

"No, I told him I'd talk with you first. I didn't know but what you had other plans."

"Aye, I have other plans, lad. But ye'll not be obligated by 'em. D'ye know why I wanted ye here on the seventh?"

"No. I couldn't figure it out. But I knew you must have a good reason."

"Aye, a good reason indeed. But come, let's fetch chairs an' sit here in the shade o' the tree—yer mother's tree, I call it. 'Twas here she used to sit an' sew. She loved to hear the roar o' the rapids. It spoke to her, she said. But what it told her, I never knew."

SEATED in the shade of the banksian, both filled their pipes. The older man spoke. "So ye didn't know why I wanted ye here on the seventh? D'ye not recollect 'tis yer birthday?"

"Why—so it is! I never gave it a thought—so many birthdays have passed unnoticed."

"Aye—but they was birthdays of no account. Although had yer mother stayed with us, she'd no doubt have took account o' them all. I recollect the first three—the only ones she lived to see—there was presents for ye—an' a cake with wee candles. She was proud o' her little man—an' she'd be prouder still of the man ye are now."

The younger man slanted the other a glance. He knew his father as a hard man, a God-fearing man, a man of stern and unbending course. Had he, the boy wondered, a softer side? Aloud he said, with a deprecatory smile:

"I don't know as there's so much to be proud of."

"There's many a thing ye don't know that yer betters does," retorted Colin harshly. "I'm no man to be maunderin' idle praise. But tomorrow, lad, ye'll be yer own man—an' 'tis well ye take stock of yerself. Ye're the best man on the river, or McDonald would not have made ye boss scowman. Ye're not overly fond o' the jug—nor have I heard that ye run after women. Ye've lived amongst the Injuns, the people of yer mother—I tended to that—an' ye can out-trap, an' out-trail, an' out-shoot, an' out-paddle any one of them. An' Father Giroux tells me

ye've the finest brain in yer head he's run across in fifty year of teachin'. An' ye've a clear sense o' justice—I've tended to that, too. As ye stand, today, I'd pit ye against any man in the North. So much stands to yer credit.

But ye have faults that are glarin'—an' a glarin' fault is a credit to no man. Ye're no God-fearin'. Ye gamble at times with cards. Ye scoff at the accepted order o' things. An' ye've a pride that goeth before a fall, as the Good Book says. An' any one o' them may be the rock ye'll crash on. An' besides all that, ye're stubborn as any mule—which last might be a fault or a virtue. So there ye are—as fair an' assay as old Saint Peter himself could make—the good of ye, along of the bad. An' takin' ye as ye are, I'm offerin' ye a partnership in the tradin' post of Murchie. Tomorrow we'll fix up the papers, an' 'tis then we'll be changin' the flag. Now tell me the news of the rivers."

"Well—they've got a new hospital at Aklavik. Pederson, the French Company trader at Norman, came on upriver with us on a sixty-day leave."

"Pederson, eh—he's a good man, if a Swede. I would not trust a Swede overly far—but Pederson's all right. The man knows fur, too."

"A constable of the Mounted died at Fort Wrigley—Jackson, his name was. He died of pneumonia."

"Doubtless some rookie, or he'd of kept his feet dry."

"Oh, yes—Duncan McPherson has been transferred from Fort Chipewyan to Good Hope, on the Mackenzie."

"An' good riddance to bad rubbish, I'd say!" growled the old man.

"What!" the other regarded him in surprise. "Why, Dad—I thought McPherson was your best friend!"

"Aye, an' I thought so, too—till I found out different. A man never knows who's his friend till he's had the chance to prove him. I dropped in on him at Chipewyan a while back for a bit of a visit—an'

didn't the brazen scut show me a silver fox pelt the like of which a man sees but seldom, if ever. 'Twas so fine a pelt he kept it locked in the safe. He would not trust it in the fur loft. An' he boasted—boasted an' bragged, mind ye—that he'd got it off Wahteno, the Yellow-knife. An' him knowin' all the time that Wahteno was in debt to me!"

"But maybe he thought that Wahteno had other fur that would cover the debt."

"It makes no difference what he thought! Well he knew that, time an' again, I've turned Chipewyans away from my door an' refused to trade with 'em because I knew they stood in debt to McPherson. I didn't pick out the best of their fur, an' send 'em to Chipewyan with the leavin's. I told him to his face he was as good as a thief, an' I'd have no more to do with him as long as I lived. Mebbe now the Company'll send some man to Chipewyan who has some regard for the common ethics of trade."

YOUNG ANGUS shook his head. "I didn't hear who the Company sent to Chipewyan," he said. "But it's too bad you two quarreled. Why, I can remember when I was just a little shaver, you used to take me down to Chipewyan and we'd stay there for days at a time. You and old Duncan would talk and argue by the hour over the jug, till anyone who didn't know would think you mortal enemies, instead of old friends. And Jean and I would play around the drying racks and swing on the net reels, and set the puppies fighting, and play games with the Indian children—there were always lots of Indians camped at Chipewyan in the summertime. Jean could run faster than I with those long legs of hers. I can see her now with her braids flopping about her ears as she ran."

"Aye, aye, lad," said Colin, his eyes on the skyline of seared spruce spires. "An' times was when Duncan would come here to the Ptarmigan an' it would be my jug

we'd be emptyin' an' fillin' again from the keg. We was lonely, them years—each havin' lost his woman, an' each left with a bairn on his hands. I mind the time Duncan fetched the lass up here, an' our talk run us into the dark, what with Duncan holdin' out for the Catholics, an' me for the Presbyterians. An' the two of ye was missin' when we took thought of ye. We hunted all night along the river with lanterns, fearin' ye'd fell into the canyon. An' in the mornin' when 'twas light an' we come back to start out in another direction, here comes the two o' ye creepin' out of the kennel. Jezebel, the fiercest bitch I ever owned, was fawnin' on ye an' lickin' yer faces—an' her so savage I never let her off the chain while I owned her. I had to shoot her at last for manglin' the leg o' a native. Ye'd got tired, an' crawled in beside her that night. It goes to show ye can't tell about a bitch. But ye may be sure that both Duncan an' me held our breath till the both of ye was beyond the reach o' her chain. Then we went in the house an' emptied the jug on't—an' ye may well believe we was needin' it."

THE younger man nodded. "I think I can just remember that—I have a dim recollection of Jean and me sleeping in the kennel with a dog. I'm sorry you quarreled with McPherson. It seems such a little thing to break up a lifelong friendship. I think you'll be missing him."

"I will not say I'll not be missin' him. I could overlook his stubborn an' bigoted defense o' Popery. But I can't overlook his beatin' me out of a pelt the like of that one. Time was when Duncan McPherson was honest an' ethical as any man. But he's slippin', lad—that's likely why the Company sent him downriver to trade with the Hares an' the Loucheux."

"It's cold and bleak at Good Hope," said Angus. "A hell of a place for a girl—only sixteen miles south of the circle—a dreary, windswept stretch, with the

Ramparts just above, and the river wide as a lake below. It will be different from Chipewyan, or the mission of Father Giroux."

"Aye," agreed the inflexible old Scot. "But Duncan should of thought o' that. 'Tis likely what the Good Book means where it says 'The Sins o' the fathers shall be visited upon the children'. He should not have stooped to sharp practice."

"Speaking of sharp practice," observed Angus, "Jacques Larue is on the river with an outfit of trade goods. He was at Fort McMurray when we got there. Corporal Downey and a couple of constables went through his outfit, but they didn't find anything out of the way. He was whining about the police persecuting him."

"Aye, the dirty, murderin' whiskey-peddlin' hell-hound! 'Twould not be persecutin' him over much if they'd heave him in the river with a stone to his neck! Corporal Downey knows he's been sellin' liquor to the natives for years, but Larue's cunning an' wiley, an' the police have not yet caught him with the evidence the law demands for conviction. An' Downey knows, too, he murdered Miqua, on Lake o' the Wind."

"Murdered him?"

"Aye—as good as. 'Twas Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear done the actual killin'—they paddled out an' tipped over Miqua's canoe whilst he was liftin' his net. But 'twas Larue's doin'. He paid fer the job with a jug of whiskey."

"And you say Downey knows that? Why don't he arrest him, then?"

"Knowin' is one thing, lad—an' provin' is another. The law demands proof for conviction. Ye know Old Man Winnie, the old crackpot that's been runnin' hither an' yon in the outlands for goin' on more years than a man can remember, pratin' of the mother lode—well, he set amongst the rocks on the shore of Lake o' the Wind an' seen Paul Blind Man an' the Big Bear drown Miqua. He also seen

Larue stand there on a rock an' watch 'em do it, an' he seen him pay 'em off with a jug."

"But why should Larue want Miqua killed? And why would Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear kill him? And why didn't Old Man Winnie report the matter to the police?"

"Losh, ye're fuller of questions than a nut is of meat! But I'll tell ye the why to 'em all. Larue wanted Miqua out the way because Miqua wouldn't let the Lake o' the Wind Injuns trade their fur for Larue's whiskey. Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear wanted him out of the way because they wanted whiskey, an' with Miqua gone, they'll have their own way with the Lake o' the Wind band. An' Old Man Winnie did report the murder to Downey. He told me an' Duncan McPherson about it first, in the tradin' room at Chipewyan, an' the next day Downey came, and he told him. And Downey went with Winnie to Lake o' the Wind to investigate the matter, but 'tisin't likely he found the evidence he'd need—for ye say Larue's still free to come an' go, even darin' to show up at the McMurray police post. Ye see, lad, it takes more than the word of a crazy old crack-pot like Winnie to convict a man of murder."

"There is no justice in that," opined the younger man, frowning. "If Downey knows he's guilty, the law should kill him off. It seems that the law is a clumsy tool for the working of justice."

"An' who are ye to be settin' there makin' light of the law? Do ye not know that the law is the bulwark o' civilization?"

A cynical smile twitched the corners of the other's lips. "But suppose that one is not overly impressed with civilization? Is it, then, a crime to hold lightly its bulwark?"

OLD COLIN stared at his son aghast. He scowled, and when he spoke his brain fumbled for words to express his

outraged disapproval. "What? Why—why—civilization is the—the—why without civilization the world would revert to savagery!"

"Well—what of it? I have lived a good deal among the so-called savages—among the Indians, the people of my mother. I have found them honest, and generous—a simple folk, self-sufficient and happy—as long as they remain aloof from civilization."

"But, lad—they're heathen! They have strange beliefs—an' they know naught of heaven or hell!"

"So what?"



"Why—they're not Christians; they've not seen the light!"

"Maybe not, but their morals, I have observed, are good in direct ratio with their ability to avoid contact with—civilization."

Colin Murchie's brow lowered like a thunder cloud, and he smote his palm with a hairy fist. "Yer own mother was a product of this civilization ye would make light of! A good Christian she was—though a Catholic! An' a finer woman never drew the breath of life!"

The younger man nodded. "She was the exception that proves the rule—a senseless and vapid saying, when analyzed, but it conveys the idea. Stop and think. You have lived in the North for many years. You have known many Indians. You have had dealings with them. You speak several of their languages. Tell me, now—would you rather deal with the Indians of the rivers; or with those of the back country, who have had little or no contact with—civilization?"

"Why—well—I would rather trade with the natives of the back country. But—"

"Why?"

"They'll pay their debts. They have not learned—"

"They have not learned the skulduggery and the craftiness, and the crookedness of—civilization. Isn't that right? Stop and think—run over in your mind the Indians you know that have had close contact with this civilization that so impresses you. How many of them, among all those you know, would you trust, as you would trust any one of the back country Indians?"

"'Tis because they learn, an' take up with the vices of civilization, rather than its virtues."

"So? But there are no missions or schools in the country for the teaching of these vices. Yet scattered all along the length of the rivers are missions for the teaching of Christianity. It would seem, then, that this Christianity had failed of its purpose—that another bulwark of civilization is as futile as the law. You yourself must admit that contact with Christianity and civilization has worked more harm than good among the natives—witness the Indians of the rivers. And you must admit that the law is not very efficient in the working of justice—witness Jacques Larue."

"Aye—but the hand of God will lay heavy on him, some day. The ways of the Lord are mysterious ways—an' cannot always be fathomed by the mind of man."

"You're just like all the rest of 'em, Dad," smiled the younger man. "You can't be pinned down when you're confronted with the facts. Instead of facing them, you take refuge behind vague generalities and threadbare platitudes."

"I WARNED ye of yer faults!" exclaimed Colin. "I told ye ye was not God-fearin'. An' that ye scoffed at the accepted order of things! Foosh with yer heresies, an' yer mockery! I'll not argue with ye. Ye're more stubborn even than Duncan McPherson, who at least had the

fear o' God in his heart—thought a Catholic. Where was Larue headin'—with his shoddy goods, an' his whiskey?"

"He had no liquor with him—at least the police couldn't find any. He's probably got a cache somewhere that he can run to when he wants it. He was heading downriver with his goods—he had that Dog Rib breed with him, Bat Lemoyne."

"Aye, a crafty scut—but not so smart as Larue."

"McDonald slipped me the word that Larue had threatened to trade in this territory—bragged that he would run you out of the North."

"Aye," said the older man heavily. "He's made the like threat before. He covets the trade of the Yellowknives, an' the Dog Ribs of the Burntwood country. He tried to murder me, once. Doubtless he'll try it again—an' lad, if he succeeds, I'm askin' ye to promise me that ye'll take no private revenge. Ye'll help the law—but ye'll let the law punish him."

"But if—"

"Have done with yer 'buts' an' yer 'ifs'!" thundered the old Scot wrathfully. "Would ye be shakin' yer 'buts' an' yer 'ifs' in the face of God? 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,' saith the Lord. An' the law is the tool of God in the hand o' men!" He paused suddenly, his eyes on the younger man's face. When he resumed, his voice had lost all harshness. "I do not want to seem hard on ye, lad. But I know ye, even better than ye know yerself—an' well I know the blood that flows in yer veins. 'Tis the blood of chieftains—o' Scottish chiefs—an' chiefs among the Injuns. 'Tis not blood to trifle with—a wild an' a haughty blood, that ill brooks a wrong. 'Tis a blood that unless curbed by a cool brain would crash through to an end, without heed to means—be they bold deeds, or trickery. I'd rest easy, lad, if I had yer promise."

After a long moment of silence Angus slowly nodded his head. "All right," he said shortly. "I promise. No matter what

happens, I will not kill Larue. And I'll help the law to seek vengeance."

CHAPTER IV

A SHOT FROM THE RIDGE

AT THE conclusion of breakfast the following morning, Colin Murchie reached to the floor beside his chair and raising a heavy iron box to the table, unlocked it with a key, and threw back the lid. Lifting a paper from the box, he laid it aside.

"My will," he said, "leavin' a' my property to you in case o' death." A thick packet of documents following the will. "Stocks an' bonds," he explained, "an' the book showin' cash on hand in the bank in Edmonton. I have invested, here an' yon, in ventures that looked sound to me—there's stock in the Tar Sands Company, for it may well be, lad, that the future of this country lies in oil. An' there's deeds to spruce lands an' whatnot. Years ago David Gaunt pointed out the wisdom of pickin' up likely tracts o' spruce. Time'll come, he said, when 'twill prove a profitable investment—pulpwood, he called it. They use it in the makin' of paper. An' I have vast respect for David Gaunt's opinion. He's a man that's got rich by cashin' in on what he knows of the outlands. Ye're twenty-one years old today, lad. We're partners now—an' the half of all this is yours. There'll be time to go into that, later."

"But, Dad—I haven't earned—"

"Have done with yer talk till I've had my say out! Ye say ye haven't earned it. But I'm tellin' ye that if ye'd not earned it; not one dollar of it would ye get. Why d'ye think I sent ye, time an' again, to live amongst the Injuns? D'ye think I did it to get rid of ye? Or, mayhap, because I thought 'twould be an easy an' comfortable life for ye? I did not! I done it with an eye on the future. I done it so ye'd learn to live in the bush when occasion demanded, an' learn something of

hardship an' privation. But mostly, so ye'd learn the language of the natives, an' their ways. So ye'd have understandin' of their needs an' requirements—o' their limitations, an' their virtues. Because knowledge of these things, lad, will make for fair dealin'. For twenty-six year the post o' MURCHIE has stood for honesty an' justice in the land—an' I'm minded that when I pass on, I'll be leavin' it in better hands than mine—in the hands of one who with wisdom an' understandin' will carry on the tradition of the post.

"An' why d'ye think I sent ye to the Mission? 'Twas not for the matter o' religion—an' had it been, I can see now that the time would have been wasted. It was to give ye book learnin' beyond what I ever had. An' Father Giroux tells me ye're the best student he's seen in all his years of teachin'. He wants ye should go to the provinces—to some college, or university, or whatnot. That is as you will. There is money enough, an' to spare, if ye're so minded. An' the partnership still stands, whether or no.

"An' why do ye think I sent ye to work on the river? So ye'd become like the worthless scum that takes the brigade down in the summer, an' hang around the railroad towns all winter? No, no—it was to harden ye, lad—to give ye a taste of back-breakin' toil. To teach ye to hold up yer end amongst rough men, an' bad—an' so ye'd learn the river.

"'Twas all done, lad, so ye'd learn the North, so when the time came, ye'd be a fit man to cope with the North—to meet with the wisdom of experience, the problems that will confront ye. 'Tis a hard schoolin' ye've had, lad—an' purposely hard. 'Tis thus ye've earned yer pardnership.

"'Tis time now that ye should make yer decision. Will ye go to the provinces to seek education beyond what ye got at the mission? Or will ye stay on in the North with me?"

The answer came without hesitation.

"I'm staying here—in the North. The provinces have nothing for me. I care nothing for further education. It can do me no good, save to more deeply impress upon my mind a fact I already know—that the civilization, of which it is a product, is a man-made monster which, when it has succeeded in destroying all the little peoples of the earth, under the justification of necessary expansion, will turn up itself, and devour itself in its own insatiate greed. There have been many civilizations—and greed has devoured them all."

"'Tis a dour picture ye paint," said the older man, frowning. "If I believed as ye do, I'd not care to keep on livin' in the world."

"And neither would I, if I had to live amid the insensate thing that is civilization. That's why I am staying here in the North. There is little here to tempt its far-reaching tentacles. It may be it will pass us by."

"It is as I have wished," said Colin, "that ye work here with me."

PAUSING, he reached into the box—and lifted out a packet. As he removed the wrapping of oiled silk, the younger man caught a glimpse of shimmering crimson. Colin was on his feet, now—holding by two of its corners a new flag upon which was blazoned in letters of white the legend:

MURCHIE
AND
SON

"'Tis no common flag—this. 'Tis a flag for grand occasions—a flag of silk. Yer mother made it—'broidered the letters, stitch by stitch. Hours on end she'd sit in the shade of yon tree listenin' to the voice of the rapids, an' in winter, there beside the fireplace with the flames roarin' up the chimney, whilst I read aloud from some book." He paused, and when he continued a moment later, his voice was a bit husky. "At times I'd look up,

an' her fingers would be stilled, an' her eyes restin' on ye curled up asleep at her feet on the bearskin, with mebbe a puppy or two lying beside ye.

"Aye, she was proud o' ye, laddie, an' she looked forward to this day when the new flag should be run to the top of the pole—but 'twas the will of God she never was to see it. She was a fine woman, as proud o' the Murchie flag as I myself—for 'tis a flag that is as honorable in the outlands as the flag of the Company itself.

"An' this new flag, lad—we'll keep it floatin' as proud as the old. An' when I'm gone, 'twill be a charge on ye to see that it remains honored an' unsullied. We'll plant it on the ridge, lad—in a rock cleft close by the grave where yer mother sleeps high above the roar of the rapids. She loved that sound, even as she loved to watch the colors in the rainbow mists that rise high above it—the mists, lad, that keep her grave green in the summer, an' cover it with a new shroud of pure white each day of the long cold months of the winter. An' 'tis there beside her, ye'll be layin' me when the time comes, an' the flag will float above us—a fittin' monument to both."

He returned the papers to the strong box, turned the key, and carried it to an inner room. When he returned, he picked up a keen ax from the corner by the fireplace. "I'll go cut the new pole, lad. 'Tis a stick I've long had my eye on—slim an' straight as a die for a good sixty foot without limb or blemish. I can fall it almost where we want it, an' whilst ye stay here an' clear up the dishes, I'll peel the pole an' rough-shape the butt to the crevice."

LLEFT to himself, Angus proceeded with the household duties, washing the dishes in scalding water, drying them and returning them to their shelves. He smiled as the realization dawned on him that he had a real affection for the stern, austere man who was his father. Always

he had respected him; at times he had feared him—but he had never loved him—had never suspected that beneath that cold, hard exterior lay a softer, even a sentimental nature. He was conscious of



a deep admiration for this man who in his loneliness had deliberately sent his son away from him to face hardship and danger—for that son's own good, that he might become a better man. He had lived among the Indians, among the Yellowknives, the people of his mother, and among the Dog Ribs, long enough to know, and unconsciously to accept the natives' appraisal of Colin Murchie. It was an impersonal appraisal. He would not cheat, and he would allow no man to cheat him. He would pay full value for fur whether he bought it from an Indian, or from a white man. Unlike the other free-traders, he would sell no whiskey. In the lodges of the Indians he had listened to tales of his father's dealings with natives—of natives that had been carried on his books for two, and even for three years when ill luck had dogged their footsteps—and of others who had been driven from the country by Murchie in reprisal for a wrong. And the verdict was that Colin Murchie was just. He was a good man in the North.

As he returned the dishpan to its peg behind the stove, and hung the dish towel on the wire above the stove to dry, Angus realized that he was proud to be this man's son. He, too, would be a good man in the North. He would be just.

As he took the broom from its corner he heard, above the dull roar of the rapid, a sharp crack. Colin had felled the tree for the flag pole; yet that was not the sound

of a falling tree—it was a sharper, a more explosive sound. He stepped to the door and glanced toward the ridge. The spruce tree lay along the ridge, its partially peeled trunk gleaming white in the sunlight, its top protruding over the wall of the canyon. But across the trunk lay a curiously huddled, crumpled figure—the figure of a man clad in a checked shirt of red and black, the figure of Colin Murchie! A slight movement caught his eye at the edge of the scrub on the ridge-crest beyond the opposite wall of the canyon. Drawing swiftly back from the doorway, Angus dashed across the room, seized the rifle from the rack of caribou horns above the huge fireplace, jacked a cartridge into the chamber and again leaped to the doorway. A man was standing in full view on the bare crest of the ridge a hundred yards distant, and rifle in hand was gazing fixedly across the canyon at the figure crumpled across the pole. Throwing up his rifle, Angus brought the sights to bear on the man's chest. At a hundred yards he couldn't miss. Just as his finger was about to squeeze the trigger, the man turned his face toward him—the face of Jacques Larue!

ANGUS' finger relaxed on the trigger as his own words seared his brain, "No matter what happens, I will not kill Larue"—and at the same instant the man leaped backward and disappeared into the bush.

Dropping the rifle to the floor, Angus dashed across the tiny clearing and clambered up the steep ascent to the ridge. There, just beyond the grave of his mother, the huddled figure moved slightly. The next moment Angus was on his knees beside it, raising the head in his arms. Blood stained the shirt front and felt warm and wet and sticky to his hand as he gazed into the bearded face. The eyelids fluttered open, and the lips moved. "Ye'll not be needin' the new flag, laddie," said the man in a voice hardly above a

whisper. "Put it back in the box. The old one will do—just MURCHIE." Bloody foam surged from the lips, muffling the words. Hurriedly Angus wiped it away and bent closer. "'Twas Larue—he got me—but—lad—ye'll remember—yer—promise?"

"Yes, Dad—I'll remember—" He halted abruptly, and for a long moment knelt there staring into the bearded face. Colin Murchie was dead.

CHAPTER V

JACQUES LARUE MAKES A MISTAKE

AFTER the inspection of his trade goods at Fort McMurray, Jacques Larue and his satellite, Bat Lemoyne, continued on down the river. They passed Fort Chipewyan and dropped down the Slave to a point some twenty miles above the mouth of the Ptarmigan where they cached the goods and canoes and struck inland to meet the band of Dog Ribs that inhabited the lake country at the source of the Burntwood River. Arriving at the summer camp of the Indians, the head man informed him that the band had agreed to trade this year with Murchie on the Ptarmigan. After hours of futile argument, backed up by many promises, which he had no intention of fulfilling, Larue had finally been convinced that the band was not to be shaken from its decision, and retired with Lemoyne to their camp on the shore of a small lake.

"Mebbe-so dat bes' we go back to Athabasca an' trade wit' Swampy Cree," suggested Lemoyne.

Larue, in a sullen rage, vetoed the idea. "Not by a damn sight! These Dog Ribs have got better fur and more of it than any of the Swampy Crees—and I'm going to get it! At least, I'll get the pick of it; they can take the rough lot to Murchie—I wouldn't handle it, anyway. In the morning, you hit back to the river and start packing the goods to this camp. I'm striking south to the shore of Lake Atha-

basca where Donovan and his gang should have my liquor cached, by this time—seven good kegs of it. Three times that many, when I get it cut for the trade.

"If Downey and his damn constables at McMurray had known that Donovan's men, even as they checked over our outfit, were shoving up the Gaudet to the lake with those seven kegs, he'd never have given us a clean bill. A man's got to be smart, Lemoyne—even if they should run onto Donovan, they couldn't connect me with the liquor. I'd say I knew nothing about it—and leave Donovan holding the bag.

"I'll take a keg out of the cache and pack it here, and believe me, when these natives get a few drinks in 'em they'll forget all about their promise to trade with Murchie."

AFTER Lemoyne had departed the following morning, Larue, instead of striking immediately southward, sat beside his little fire and sipped tea as his cunning brain toyed with an idea. He remembered that young Angus Murchie had been at McMurray with McDonald as he and Lemoyne were passing police inspection. He knew that for the past two years Angus had worked on the river in the summer and trapped with the Indians in the winter. He reasoned, therefore, that the lad could not get along with old Colin—possibly he hated him even as he, Larue, hated him and feared him. Larue's hatred of the old Scot was based on the fact that never had he been able to horn in on the trade of those of the Yellowknives and the Dog Ribs, and Slavis who traded with Murchie. Good trappers, these Indians of the back country, whose trade would be worth much money to any who could hold it—and Murchie was holding it against the Company, and against the fly-by-night free traders who peddled cheap trade goods and watered liquor. And he feared him because he knew that Murchie would turn him in to

the police the moment he could secure evidence that would convict him of selling liquor to the Indians. And well Larue knew that that moment might come at any time—for Murchie had contacts with the natives known to no one but himself.

Larue's hatred flamed into a consuming rage at thought that now these Burntwood River natives, with whom he, himself, had traded for the past two years, would this year trade with Murchie.

"Damn Murchie!" he rasped aloud. "If I only hadn't missed him that time on the Cascade portage! He suspected it was I who fired that shot—but he never could prove it. If I could only—" he paused, suddenly, and stared into the little flames over the rim of his teacup. With Murchie out of the way Angus would inherit the trading post on the Ptarmigan. Was it not possible that he and Angus could form, if not a regular partnership, at least some sort of an alliance? It was not probable that the younger man would take the same firm stand against selling liquor that his father had taken—and with the Murchie post's established trade—what might they not accomplish! Larue's eyes brightened with greed. Murchie was alone at his post on the Ptarmigan, only one day's journey to the northward. It should be easy—and this time he would not miss.

Rising to his feet he made up a light pack, and taking his rifle, struck out to the northward. He camped that night on a small creek that flowed into the Ptarmigan just below the long transverse ridge or dike that reached from rim to rim of the broad valley, and through which the river broke in a welter of high-flung spray.

In the morning he followed the ridge which he knew would take him to the canyon, only a few yards above the Murchie post. He could lie on the ridge, and if there were no Indians about, could wait for a chance to pot Murchie as he stepped from his doorway. The plan was simple—and safe. There would be no

witnesses—no telltale tracks, or fingerprints. He would not approach nearer than the top of the ridge on the opposite side of the river—and the ridge crest was solid rock; would leave no tracks, even there. And he would take care not to leave the ejected shell where the police could find it—he had read of how a man had recently been convicted because the ejector of his gun left certain tiny scratches or marks upon the empty shell that could have been made by no other gun. He had read, also, that the police had a new method of micro-photography whereby they could state, and even prove to the satisfaction of a court, that a certain bullet had been fired from a certain gun—and no other. The police were getting smart—but they were not the only smart ones. He, Jacques Larue, was smarter than all the police—smarter, even than Corporal Downey, whom all evil-doers feared—had he not been outwitting Downey for the past several years? And he would outwit him again. For, if Downey should suspect him, and should he investigate the shooting, and even succeed in finding the bullet that killed Murchie, he would have his trouble for his pains—for he, Larue, would be carrying another rifle. The one with which he had shot Murchie would be sunk deep in the muck of some bog. Yes, a man had to be smart to live nowadays.

LARUE trod the spruce-timbered ridge swiftly in a high state of elation at the safety of his scheme, and the thought of the enormous profits to be derived from his trade with Murchie's Indians.

As the roar of the rapids sounded in his ears, he slowed his pace, and proceeded with caution. As he neared the canyon, the sound of a crashing tree reached his ears above the dull voice of the river, and he threaded his way among the spruce trunks with the stealth of an Indian.

The crest of the ridge was bare of tim-

ber for some ten yards back from the verge of the canyon, and squatting in the edge of the scrub, Larue peered across this open space at a man who stood beside a tall spruce tree which he had just felled. His heart beats quickened as he recognized Murchie — not fifty yards away on the opposite side of the canyon that cut the ridge in two. Even as he looked, the man stooped over the prostrate tree trunk and, working with a short grip on his axe helve, began to peel the bark from the trunk.

Gripping his rifle nervously, Larue curbed his impatience, drew back into the scrub, and worked his way to a point from which he obtained a view of the log trading post and the clearing that surrounded it. Presently he breathed a sigh of satisfaction. The post was deserted. No tent was pitched in the clearing—no Indians were loafing about in the shade of the building or the banksian tree. Murchie was alone at the post. And at fifty yards—

Slipping stealthily back to his former position, Larue watched gloatingly for several minutes as the man worked at his peeling. Then, resting his rifle barrel in the crotch of a tree, he took deliberate aim at Colin's broad chest and pressed the trigger. Without a sound Murchie pitched forward across the tree trunk, and Larue jacked another cartridge into the chamber, remembering to retrieve the empty shell which he tossed into the canyon.

Then, rifle ready for another shot, he stepped boldly out into the open, and peered searchingly at the figure that lay crumpled across the log. But the figure lay very still, and Larue's glance swept again to the trading post. The next instant, with a cry of terror, he leaped back into the shelter of the scrub. His brain reeled, and the blood seemed suddenly to have turned to ice within his veins—for there, in the doorway of the trading room, he had recognized the face

of Angus Murchie peering at him over the barrel of a leveled rifle. Gone was the sense of security and elation, as abysmal terror lent wings to the feet that carried him swiftly back along the ridge. The sweat of exertion mingled with the cold sweat of horror as he ran on and on—one second more and the finger of Angus Murchie would have pressed the trigger. He, Jacques Larue, would have pitched forward upon the rock—a grotesque, crumpled thing, like that other grotesque crumpled figure that lay across the tree trunk beyond the canyon.

When finally his pace slowed through



sheer exhaustion, a new fear assailed him—the fear that Angus Murchie would overtake him and avenge the murder of his father. He knew that Angus was counted one of the best men on the river—both as to his ability as a scowman, and also in the quick, brutal fights that were of almost daily occurrence on the brigade. And he had no doubt of the youth's ability in the bush—his long sojourns among the Indians of the back country would assure that. On and on he pushed with many a backward glance, half expecting, always fearing, that the next instant he would feel the sharp, searing stab of a bullet.

AS NIGHT approached he breathed easier, but pushed on by the light of the full moon. Later, he made a fireless camp in the heart of an almost impenetrable thicket.

As the darkness alleviated the fear of

immediate danger, so it enhanced the fear of an almost inevitable reckoning to come. His carefully laid plan had gone awry. There had been an eye witness to his shooting of Murchie. He knew that when Angus failed to overtake him, he would report the matter to the police—and he knew that there was not one chance in a thousand that he could elude the long arm of the law. Corporal Downey had repeatedly warned him that some day he would get him—that no man could keep on defying the law forever. That some day he would make the mistake that would trap him. And he had replied to these warnings, sometimes with an insolent laugh, and again with an air of injured innocence, and a protest against police persecution.

And now he had made that mistake—just as Downey had predicted he would. And Downey, himself, would take the trail—and the result would be inevitable. For no one knew better than Larue the futility of trying to evade the police in the outlands. In the cities a man could efface his identity amid the teeming thousands of his kind, but in the outlands, where his casual appearance at a trading post, or in the remotest camp of the natives, would be a matter of comment—never.

And a man must show himself to live, for he must eat. Given sufficient food, or a fish net and a supply of cartridges for the procuring of food, it was conceivable that he could live for a long time without contact with his kind. But nets rot or are carried away by the current, and no supply of cartridges is inexhaustible. It would be only a matter of time, the law is inexorable—the police never forget.

But in his present plight Larue knew that he must show himself very shortly—he had only a few days' stock of provisions, only a few cartridges, and he had no canoe. He dared not strike out for the river and reach Bat Lemoyne—for tomorrow Angus Murchie would be spread-

ing the news of his father's murder along the river, and the hand of every man would be against him. And he dared not show himself among the Yellowknives, nor the Slavis, nor the Dog Ribs—for these were friends of Murchie. When the police came, they would surely set them on his trail, and even help them follow that trail. Even the Dog Ribs of the Burntwood who had previously traded with him could not be trusted, since they had now promised to do their trading with Murchie.

Tossing restlessly in his blanket, Larue cursed aloud—why had he made that mistake? Why had he stepped out onto that bare rock, when he could just as well have remained concealed in the scrub? His sense of security had dulled his sense of cunning—and he made the mistake that Corporal Downey had predicted he would make.

Damn Downey! Larue remembered that the prediction had not been made in the spirit of boasting or vaunting. The young officer had merely stated that some day he would make the mistake that would trap him—as though it were a thing inevitable—a thing that could not be avoided—almost as though it were a fact already accomplished. And, now, it was a fact.

LARUE shuddered at thought of a noose being tightened about his neck—he Jacques Larue, who loved to live, who had found keen zest and exhilaration in outwitting the Mounted, and zest and exhilaration in the spending of his ill-gotten gains in the gay night life of the cities—standing on a scaffold while men who spoke tersely, but in solemn, even kindly tones, were arranging that inexorable noose, and drawing a black cap over his head and down over his eyes—the black cap that would shut out the sunlight for the last time.

Damn them all! Damn the law, with its policemen, its judges, and its hang-

men! What chance did a man have, with the hand of every man against him? Corporal Downey had almost arrested him only a short time ago—almost, but not quite — for the killing of Miqua, the Swampy Cree. Had Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear weakened under Downey's questioning and told what they knew of that drowning— Ah, that was it—Paul Blind Man, and the Big Bear! There was a chance to once again outwit the law! Why had he not thought of those two? By traveling fast, he could reach Lake o' the Wind in two days.

A sense of assurance, almost of elation, supplanted the abject terror that had gripped him, and after a time, he slept.

CHAPTER VI

THE ALIBI

DAYLIGHT found him striking rapidly southward. Avoiding the Burntwood band, he swung to the southeastward, and toward evening of the second day, he arrived at Lake o' the Wind. Proceeding at once to Paul Blind Man's cabin, a miserable windowless affair of spruce poles and mud, he paused in the open doorway and peered into the interior where a fat, slovenly squaw was stirring a pot over a warped sheet iron stove. A figure that had been lying on a pile of robes in a corner of the hovel, rose to a sitting posture and stared at the intruder. Then, recognizing Larue, he gained his feet, shuffled to the door, and extended his hand.

"Bo' jow', Paul—glad to see me, eh?"

The Indian regarded him impassively. "You got hooch?"

"Sure—there'll be plenty of time to talk about hooch. First I want to talk to you and the Big Bear. Alone," he added, with a meaning glance toward the woman.

Without turning his head, the Indian spat out a guttural command, and the woman turned from the stove, waddled

past the two, and disappeared. A few moments later, the Big Bear joined them, and the three seated themselves upon the ground.

Larue tendered tobacco, and when the pipes were going, he spoke. "You remember the drowning of Miqua, and the part you two played in it. And you remember that I gave you a jug of whiskey, as I promised?"

Paul Blind Man said nothing.

"Too mooch water," the Big Bear grunted.

"Water, yes," replied Larue. "As I have told you, it is not good to drink the whiskey straight. It is too strong for the stomach, and it burns the throat. You have seen white men drink whiskey, and you have seen that most of them—those who know—put much water in the glass with their whiskey."

"Wite mans put water in free. Injun pay for water," said Paul Blind Man.

Larue shrugged. "I only put water in the whiskey I sold you because I knew it was not good for you to drink it straight. It is part of my business to look out for your health. If I sold you strong liquor, and you drank it, and it should kill you, then I would lose trade. A dead man cannot trap, and he has no fur to sell. But let us forget that part. If you desire to buy the whiskey straight, I will sell it to you—but it will cost a little more, and you must put the water in before you drink it."

"You got w'iskey?" asked the Big Bear.

"Yes—plenty of it. I have none right here with me, but I have plenty on the big lake. The day after tomorrow you can get it. But it is of the killing of Miqua I would speak first. You remember the policeman, Corporal Downey, came here and asked you many questions. And you told him you knew nothing of the death of Miqua, except that he went out in his canoe to lift his net, and the canoe was seen sometime later by the people of the village, floating upside

down, and later, the body of Miqua was found caught in the net. It is well that you stuck to your story, and that you told him I had traded you no liquor. Corporal Downey questioned me, too. He followed me from here, and overtook me on Lake Athabasca when Bat and I were heading south with the fur. He asked me many questions, too—and he tried to make me think that you two had told the truth—that you had admitted you killed Miqua, and that I hired you to do it. He did not say this in so many words, for in such matters Downey is a fool—he will not lie to a man, even though by lying, he might gain his end. But I denied that I knew anything about the death of Miqua, and so finally Downey gave it up and went away. But if I had told him what I know, then he would have come back here and arrested you two, and taken you to the jail in Fort Saskatchewan, and you would have been tried before the judge, and they would have hanged you with a rope, and have killed you for killing Miqua—for that is the white man's law."

LARUE paused and he noted that the two exchanged glances. "De poliss hang you, too," the Big Bear stated. "C'p'l Downey, he say, mebbe-so day hang you for git us to keel Miqua—an' only mak' us stay on de jail 'long tam, for do lak you say."

"Ho, he did, eh? How could you prove I hired you? The law demands proof. I could have said you lied. Even if you'd shown him the jug I gave you, I could have said I traded it to you for fur—and I had the fur to back up the statement. Of course, I'd have been arrested on the liquor charge—but after a short time in jail, I would have been free again. Downey was only bluffing—he was playing us one against the other. But it didn't work—we all stuck to our story."

"An' now you com' back an' want our fur," said Paul Blind Man, frowning. "You say, you no tell Downey—we no git

hang. You say we tell Downey, you no git hang, 'cause we no kin prove—but we git hang for sure. So now you com', an' you say, 'gi'me you fur.' You no gi'me, I tell Downey you keel Miqua, an' you git hang, eh?"

Larue laughed into the two scowling faces. "So that's why you think I'm here, is it? You think I would doublecross you? You believe that I would demand that you give me your fur to keep my mouth shut? I am sorry, my friends, that you have so poor an opinion of me. I want your fur—yes. But I am willing to pay you for it—and pay well.

"The reason I have come to you now, is because I need your help—and for this help I will pay you well. I will pay you each a jug of whiskey—strong whiskey, not cut like the trade whiskey is cut with water. Each of you will get a jug, and each jug will make three jugs of the kind you buy when you add the water to it—one cup whiskey, two cups water. That makes six jugs, and six jugs will last a long time."

"How mooch work we got to do?" queried the Big Bear.

"I'm 'fraid for keel more man. Nex' tam mebbe-so de poliss ketch. Mebbe-so som' wan talk," said Paul Blind Man, suspiciously.

"There is no work to do," said Larue. "And there is no man to be killed. All I want you to do, is to tell Corporal Downey, or any police that come here and ask you, that I came here two days before the full of the moon, and stayed with you here until the second day after the full of the moon. You can remember that, can't you? I came here two days *before* the full of the moon—that was night before last—and stayed here with you till two days *after* the full of the moon."

HE paused, and when both Indians nodded their understanding, he continued. "You know Colin Murchie who

has a post down on the Ptarmigan. You know that he's an independent trader, the same as I am—and you know that he will sell no liquor to the Indians. He drinks liquor himself, but he says the Indians shall have no liquor. That is not right. You like liquor the same as the white men like it—yet the police, and men like Murchie say you cannot have liquor. They are not friends of the Indians. They do everything they can to keep you from getting liquor. They come into your country, and they take your fur, but they will sell you no liquor. I am a friend of the Indians. I sell them liquor because I believe they have as much right to drink liquor as the white man has. I continually risk danger of arrest by the police, merely that I can bring liquor to you people who like it. Is that not true?"

Both Indians nodded agreement. "We no lak Murchie. He no sell hooch. We no trade wit' Murchie."

"Just so. But if someone who would sell you hooch should get Murchie's post—me, for instance—then you would trade there, because you could come and buy hooch whenever you wanted it, and not have to depend on my getting through with a batch whenever I can. Sometimes many months must pass between my trips. That is because I must run the liquor into the country without the police knowing it—and that is hard, because they are always watching the rivers. Would you not like to trade at a post where you could get liquor whenever you wanted it?"

"Yes," replied Paul Blind Man. "But no post sell hooch. De Company no sell. Murchie no sell. Slavin have post, wan tam, on de beeg lak', sell hooch—but de poliss ketch, an' put heem een de jail."

"Yes, I know Slavin. He was a fool. He was not smart. To sell hooch and get away with it, a man must be smart. I am smart. I will not be caught."

"Two days ago, the day of the full moon, I went to the post of Murchie and killed him. I did this because I am a

friend of the Indians, and I believe a man who would refuse to sell liquor to them should die—so I shot him as he stood upon the high ridge just above the post. After I had shot him I stepped out upon the rock, for I, too, was upon the ridge. When I saw that Murchie was indeed dead, I looked down at the post, and then



I stepped back quickly into the bush. For there, standing in the doorway of the trading room was Angus Murchie, the old man's son, and he was looking at me over the barrel of his rifle. Had I not moved quickly, I, too, would have been shot—and the Indians would have lost a great friend. So I came quickly away from there, and I came straight to you, because I know you are my friends. I know you do not want the police to hang me for killing Murchie—for who, then, would sell you liquor?"

PAUL BLIND MAN interrupted. "We no want you to git hang. But Angus, he tell de poliss he see you shoot Murchie. Mebbe-so de poliss b'lieve Angus mor' most dey b'lieve Injun."

"Listen!" exclaimed Larue. "The police won't believe Angus. Angus is not even an Indian. He's nothing but a damn breed! His mother was a Yellowknife. If you do as I say, and stick to your story, the police will have to believe you. For they know that all breeds will lie. Besides that, there are two of you, and only one

of him. And my lawyer will show the judge and the jury that Angus could not have stood in the doorway of the trading room and tell one man from another, because of the mist that rises from the canyon.

He will admit that Angus may have seen someone there who looked like me—but that he cannot say, for sure, that it was I. And after you have told the judge and the jury that I came here two days before the full of the moon, and stayed here for four days, then they will know that the man Angus saw on the ridge was not I, but some other. For they will believe that I was here on Lake o' the Wind at the time Murchie was shot—and a man cannot be two places at once. He cannot be at Murchie's post on the day of the full moon, and be on Lake o' the Wind on that day also, because two hard days' journey lie between the two places."

The Big Bear nodded agreement. "Dat is so. For two jug strong w'iskey we say you com' here two day before de full moon an' stay four day."

Paul Blind Man shook his head somberly. "Las' year I'm work on de riv', on de brigade. I'm know Angus Murch'. He work on de brigade too. He damn good mans. He fight lak hell. Me, I t'ink you keel the fadder; he keel you sure. He no queet till you are dead."

"The hell he won't!" exclaimed Larue. "He couldn't kill me there on the ridge—and he'll never kill me, because he'll never get another chance. I'm a better man than he is—he could not follow me, because I am too fast for him. And when my trial is over and the police turn me loose, then I will come back down the river, and I will watch my chance, and I will kill Angus, too. And that time there will be none to see me do it. Then I will buy the trading post of Murchie from the Public Administrator, for I will offer more for it than any other will pay. And then you can buy your liquor when you want it, for I will keep a cache of it at the post."

PAUL BLIND MAN seemed far from satisfied. He shifted uneasily. "W'en Angus fin' out we say you here de day of de full moon, he'll know dat dam lie—an' mebbe-so he keel us, too."

"But I tell you I'll get Angus before he has a chance to kill you or me, or anyone!"

"Mebbe-so he keel you first'."

Larue leaned forward, frowning. "You listen to me," he said, in a low, hard voice. "I'm offering you two jugs of strong liquor to tell the police and the judge and the jury that I was here for four days at the time of the full of the moon. If you do this, and stick to your story, so that I am turned loose, I will give you two more jugs of strong liquor as soon as I get back into the North. That will make four jugs of strong liquor, or twelve jugs of good trade liquor. But if you do not tell them this, or if you let the police bluff you into saying that I was not here at the time of the full moon, then they will hang me. But before they hang me, I will tell them what I know of the death of Miqua—and I will tell them the truth, that I hired you two to drown him as he lifted his net. I will not be afraid to tell them the truth—because they can only hang me once, anyway. If they hang me for killing Murchie, they cannot hang me for killing Miqua, too. If you do not say the words that I have told you to say, and save me from being hanged; then I will say the words that will hang you. And we will all three hang together in the yard of the Fort Saskatchewan jail."

Both Indians were silent for a moment, then Paul Blind Man nodded. "We say you com' two day before de full moon an' stay four day. You wan' we say you trade?"

"No, the police might run onto Bat and check the goods, and then they'd know I still have the goods I passed McMurray with. No, tell them I came to see if you had any fur to trade, and when I found you had none, I went on to the big lake to

see the Crees at Cracking Stone Point. When I reach the lake, I will take the two jugs I promised you out of my cache, and take them to the mouth of Fishing Creek and bury them at the foot of the rock that stands alone on the west bank of the creek. You can go there and get them."

The Big Bear looked skeptical. "S'pose, mebbe-so you no bury de jug? S'pose mebbe-so you forget?"

Larue laughed. "Do you think I would forget to pay you, when my life depends on what you will say? The liquor will be at the foot of the stone. Now I will go and talk to some of the people, and ask them about their fur. It will be well if many people see me here. Then when the police come, they will remember that I was on Lake o' the Wind at about the time of the full of the moon. Tomorrow, I will go on to the big lake, and tomorrow night, I will cache your liquor at the foot of the stone."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE MISSION OF FATHER GIROUX

GENTLY Angus Murchie lowered his father's head to the rock, and rising to his feet, descended to the trading post, from whence he returned a few minutes later carrying a new blanket and a spade.

The surface of the rock ridge was broken and irregular, and in the pits and crevices of the native rock, soil had found lodgment in various depths. It was in these soil pockets that the spruce and banksian trees that timbered the ridge had taken root, and it was in one of them, also, that Colin Murchie had found sufficient depth of earth to provide a grave for his wife, that she might lie forever within sound of the rapids she loved.

Working grimly, but rapidly, Angus dug a new grave close beside the other, and when at a depth of four feet, he struck solid rock, he wrapped the body of his father in the blanket, lowered it into the grave, and mounded the earth over

it. For a long time he stood with uncovered head gazing down at the two mounds, his lips set in a grim, hard line. Then, the lips moved and words came in a hard, level tone: "I have promised that I will not kill Larue. Yet, Larue shall pay. The law demands a life for a life. We shall see what the law will do."

Then abruptly he turned away, picked up his father's axe and the spade and descended to the post. A half hour later he locked the doors, carried a light pack and his rifle to his canoe, and headed down the river. Hour after hour he paddled, forcing the light craft swiftly along the still, deep stretches, racing through white-water rapids, carrying around falls, and those rapids whose turbulence demanded a portage.

The sun sank behind distant ridges, and just as the long twilight deepened to dusk the moon rose, bathing the valley of the Ptarmigan in soft radiance. All through the night he held to the work, and at dawn paused on a portage to boil a pail of tea and wolf down a quantity of cold meat and bannocks. Mid-morning found him on the Slave, forging upstream for Fort Chipewyan, eighty miles to the southward. Holding close to the shore to take advantage of backwaters and eddies, he camped late in the afternoon at the mouth of a small creek for a short rest, and another meal of boiled tea, bannocks, and cold meat.

Fresh tracks in the mud on the bank of the creek a few yards back from the river, attracted his attention as he collected wood. When he had his fire going he followed the tracks a short distance up the creek and came upon two canoes concealed in the bush, and a cache of tarpaulin-covered goods. Raising a corner of the canvas, Angus' eyes suddenly hardened. He had seen those pieces before; he had watched Corporal Downey and a constable at Fort McMurray break them open and examine them, one by one—the trade goods of Jacques Larue!

Letting the tarp fall back into place, he explored further and on a wet sandbar a little distance beyond, found two sets of tracks leading on up the creek. "So Lemoyne was with Larue when he murdered my father, eh?" he muttered grimly, as he stood staring down at the tracks. "Well—I didn't promise not to kill Lemoyne."

Abruptly he returned to his fire, ate his meal, and for a long time he sat, his eyes on the rifle that lay across his pack. Finally he shook his head slowly. "No. A promise is a promise, in the spirit, as in the letter. Only one man fired that shot. That man was Larue. If I find out later, that Lemoyne had a hand in the killing, then he, too, shall pay."

RETURNING the pack and the rifle to the canoe, he shoved off, and at midnight, beached his canoe at the mission of Father Giroux. Warily he ascended the short, steep slope from the landing, where several canoes lay overturned on the beach. Glancing across the broad, level playground, he saw that a light burned in the window of the priest's house.

Seated before the open fire in the little livingroom of Father Giroux, glasses and pipes in their hands, and a pitcher of the native berry wine between them, Corporal Downey and the old priest discussed, at random, the affairs of the lakes and the rivers. A warm friendship existed between these two, a friendship born of mutual respect and understanding, for each had the welfare of the lean, lone land at heart, and each in his own way, worked for its betterment.

The screened door of the tiny porch opened and closed, and a knock drew their eyes to the door which opened in response to the priest's invitation to enter.

"Angus Murchiel!" exclaimed the good priest, as a young man stepped into the room. "It was only a few days ago that you stopped in on your way downriver,

Did you not go to your father's post on the Ptarmigan? I remember he was anxious that you be there on the seventh—and that was—let's see, it still lacks five minutes of midnight—that was yesterday. Come, draw up a chair, my son—you look weary."

"I reached there on the afternoon of the sixth. Yes, I was there on the seventh—"

"You was at Murchie's post yesterday—an' you're here today!" exclaimed Corporal Downey. "Good Lord—no wonder you're tired! You must have got an early start yesterday; an' even at that, I wouldn't want to have to do it."

"It was nearly noon when I left the post," Angus replied. "The moon was full last night, and I traveled all night, and all day today, and only just reached here. I am tired. I was going to ask Father for a bed until morning, and then push on to Chipewyan—to the police. I am very lucky to find you here."

"Why do you want the police?"

"To report the murder of my father—"

"The murder of your father!" exclaimed Father Giroux. "My son, do you mean that Colin Murchie is dead?"

"Yes—he is dead. Jacques Larue shot him."

"Jacques Larue!" cried Downey. "You mean, you seen him shoot him?"

"I did not actually see him fire the shot.



But I saw him standing there on the ridge not ten seconds after the shot was fired. He stepped from the edge of the bush, and stood with his rifle ready, waiting to see whether my father would move."

"An' where was your father?"

"He was lying where he fell, crumpled over the pole he was peeling—on the ridge, just across the canyon from Larue."

"How far from where Larue was standin'?"

"Forty yards, maybe — certainly not more than fifty."

"An' it was in broad daylight?"

"Yes, about half past nine in the mornin'."

"An' where were you when you seen him?"

"I saw him from the trading room door."

FATHER GIROUX, who had stepped momentarily from the room, returned with a goblet which he filled from the pitcher and handed to Angus. "Drink this, my son, it is not a heady wine, and it will give you strength."

"Yeah," agreed Downey, "travelin' like you've been you sure need it. Now, s'pose you start at the beginnin' an' tell me the whole story. I knew Colin Murchie well—an' if he's been murdered, I'll stay on the job till I hang the man that done it. But I want to know all the facts you can tell me."

"Take your time, an' don't leave out anythin' you can think of that would have a bearin' on the case. This policin' is funny business — sometimes a little thing that don't look to be of no importance whatever, turns out to be the very item that cracks the case wide open. Now you say you was standin' in the tradin' room door when you seen Larue standin' there on the ridge, with his rifle ready in

case your father should move. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"An' did your father move?"

"No, he did not move. He was shot through the chest."

"What happened, then?"

"Larue turned and looked down toward the post, and I suppose he saw me, for he leaped back into the scrub an' disappeared."

"Did you follow him?"

"No. I dropped the rifle and hurried to my father."

"The rifle? How come you was standin' there in the door with a rifle?"

"My father had gone to the ridge to cut and peel a new flagpole. I was to join him there after I had done the house chores. I had finished the dishes and picked up the broom to sweep the floor when I heard a sharp crack. It sounded different than a falling tree—a sharper sound, like the sound of a shot. So I stepped to the doorway and glanced up toward the ridge. I saw my father lying across the tree trunk that he had partially peeled. Then I caught a movement across the canyon, and I stepped back into the room and got the rifle and ran again to the door. It was then I saw the man standing there in full view on the rock looking across at my father. I drew a bead on him and was about to pull the trigger, when he turned and looked down at the post and I saw it was Jacques Larue—so I did not press the trigger. He evidently saw me there in the doorway with my rifle on him, and he leaped quickly back into the bush."



CORPORAL DOWNEY'S brow drew into a puzzled frown. "You say that when you seen this man was Jacques Larue you didn't pull the trigger. Do you mean if it had be'n someone else you'd have shot?"

"Yes. If anyone else had shot my father I would have killed him where he stood. I am a good shot."

Downey's frown deepened. "It don't make sense," he said. "Why would you want to protect Jacques Larue? I happen to know that you're father despised him. An' if you do want to protect him, how is it that you was tearin' out the bone tryin' to get to the police to report him?"

"I did not kill Larue because I had promised my father only the day before that I would not kill him. I happened to mention that I had seen him at McMurray, when you and Constable Ames were going through his outfit. And my father said that Larue had once tried to kill him, and would doubtless try it again. And he asked me to promise that if he should kill him, I would not take private revenge—that I would let the law seek vengeance. I remembered that promise in time to avoid killing him." The young man paused and met the officer's gaze squarely. "My father," he said, "believed that the law would work justice."

Something, a slight emphasis, perhaps, on the word "father," caused the officer to ask, "An' you—what do you believe?"

Angus shrugged. "It is known to the law that for years Larue has been selling whiskey to the Indians—yet Larue is still selling whiskey to the Indians. It is also known to the law that he instigated the death of Miqua, at the hands of Paul Blind Man and the Big Bear, on Lake o' the Wind. It would seem to me that in these matters the law has not worked justice."

"You've got to have evidence to convict a man in a court of law," Downey replied. "We'll get Larue, yet, for peddlin' liquor. I'm doubtin' we'll ever convict him of

murderin' Miqua. I know he done it all right, but knowin' it ain't enough—I'd have to prove it to convict him."

Again the younger man shrugged. "Had the law worked justice, my father would not have been murdered," he said, simply.

The officer flushed slightly. "It looks like we'll have the evidence in this case, anyway," he said. "Whoever killed Colin Murchie will pay for it with his life."

Angus nodded. "Yes. Larue killed my father. I promised that I would help the law. Larue shall pay." There was a deadly certainty in the voice that caused Downey to regard him searchingly.

"Let's get back to the case," he said. "You say you hurried to your father—was he dead when you got there?"

"No, he lived for maybe half a minute. I raised his head on my arm. He opened his eyes and said, 'You'll not be needing the new flag, now; the old one will do—just MURCHIE. It was Larue got me, lad. You'll remember your promise.' Blood gushed from his mouth, and I wiped it away as best I could. I told him I'd remember—but I don't think he heard. He was dead."

"What did you do then?"

"I brought a spade and a blanket from the post, and dug a grave there on the ridge beside the grave of my mother, and wrapped him in the blanket, and buried him. It was there he wished to be buried. Then I locked up the post and came here."

DOWNEY nodded, and for several moments he sat in silence, staring into the fire. "I'm jest tryin' to get the picture," he said, at length. "Now how far is it from the door of the post where you was, to the place where Larue was standin' when you seen him?"

"Just about a hundred yards."

"An' you say he was on the other side of the canyon from the post."

"Yes."

"I've been to the post several times, an' as I rec'lect it, there's quite a considerable mist risin' out of the canyon all the time. Did you see Larue through this mist?"

"No, I had a clear view of him. The wind was from the west that morning; blowing up the river, and it swept the mist on up the canyon. There was no mist rising above the walls. If you will return with me to the post, I can show you exactly how everything happened."

"I'll get up to the post before I'm through with the case," Downey replied. "But first I'm goin' after Larue. If he killed Murchie, an' knows you seen him, he may hit for the outside. I'll drop down to Chipewyan an' have Sergeant Blake keep an eye on the river, and I'll hit back along the south side of the lake an' watch the Gaudet."

"I found Larue's cache of trade goods this afternoon," said Angus. "I camped for supper at the mouth of a creek about twenty miles up from the mouth of the Ptarmigan, and found his canoes and his goods cached there. Both he and Lemoyne had struck off up the creek afoot. I saw their tracks in the sand."

"H-u-u-m," said Downey, pinching his nether lip between thumb and forefinger. "Larue struck off up the Ptarmigan, if that's where you seen him. But that don't account for Lemoyne. If Larue intended to shoot Murchie, he would have too much sense to take a witness along—especially a man like Lemoyne who wouldn't hesitate to hold it over him if he seen any profit in it. Where would Lemoyne be headin' for, leavin' the outfit where they did?"

"Well," Angus replied, "he could strike just a little north of east and about three days back, he'd meet the Burntwood River Indians. I know that Larue has traded with them before. But my father mentioned that, this year, they had promised to trade with him. Or he could strike southeast, and reach the Lake o' the Wind band. They trade with Larue, too."

Downey nodded. "An' in any case, either Lemoyne, or Larue, or both of 'em will return to that cache. If Father Giroux can send someone up to Chipewyan with a note to Sergeant Blake, I'll slip down an' wait at that cache till one of 'em shows up."

"I can go on up to Chipewyan for you," offered Angus. "I promised that I would help the law."

"You'll get the chance to help, before we're through with this case," Downey replied. "I'd rather you'd go back to the post, an' wait till I come there, or send word to you. But keep your eyes open. Larue might try to rub you out, too—so there wouldn't be a witness to the murder."

"I can send a man to Chipewyan," said the priest. "He will start at dawn. And now I think that Angus had better get some sleep. He has had many hours of hard work, and he looks worn out."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "I'll roll in, too. I'll be headin' down for that cache at daylight."

The kindly old priest turned to Angus. "You will find a bed in the dormitory, my son. Corporal Downey can sleep here in the spare room. Good night. I shall see you in the morning."

AFTER the door had closed behind Angus, Corporal Downey sat for a long time watching the flames flow smoothly up the chimney. Finally he raised his eyes to the thin, ascetic face of the priest, with its aquiline nose, and high forehead framed by the long silvery hair. "I've known Colin Murchie ever since I've been on the river," he said. "I didn't know he was married. I've seen this young man for the past couple of years workin' with the brigade. I heard his name was Murchie. I figured he was maybe a catch brat of Murchie's, out of some back country squaw. He's a breed, ain't he?"

"Yes, Angus is a metis. But I, myself,

married Colin Murchie and the boy's mother, two years before he was born. She was a grand-daughter of old Pekwakotobi, the last great chief of the Yellowknives in the days before the Dog Ribs conquered them. She was a student here at the mission—a good student and a fine character. She made a good wife for Colin Murchie, and a good mother for the boy, although she died when he was only three or four."

"How is it I never seen him around the post when I've been there? Couldn't him an' the old man get along?"

"It is not that they could not get along," Father Giroux explained, holding a match to the bowl of his long stemmed pipe. "Since the death of his wife, the one object and aim of Colin Murchie's life was to bring up his son to be a good man in the North. To that end he left him here at the mission when he was hardly more than a baby, and instructed me to educate him to the best of my ability. I early learned that the boy had an exceptionally fine brain. I can truthfully say that in all the fifty years of my teaching, I have never encountered its equal. It is too bad that he will not continue his education at one of the higher seats of learning. With his mind, he would go far in any walk of life."

"Don't want to, eh?"

"No. He holds little but scorn for the thing we call civilization. He is a deep student of history, having read everything here in my library, and he has me send for other weighty tomes which he eagerly devours. It is his thesis that all civilization is but the evolution of greed. He points with scorn to the numerous civilizations that have toppled because of this greed—and I must say that, in the face of his arguments, one is hard put to deny it. It is the same with religion. Angus is not an atheist. He is an agnostic—a realist. Holding, as he does, that all religion is theoretical philosophy, he repudiates religion because it is not founded on

fact. To be religious one must have faith. He has not faith. Therefore, he is non-religious."

"You're gettin' in too deep for me," grinned Corporal Downey. "Policin' is more in my line. But even when the kid was at school, wouldn't there be vacations when he could have gone back to the post?"

"Yes, but again Colin had an eye to the lad's training. When he was not here at the mission, his father sent him to live among the Yellowknives, the people of his mother. It is a hard life—the life of the Indians of the back country. But Colin Murchie was a hard man—and he determined that his son should be hard, also. The Yellowknives taught him their language. They taught him to hunt, and to trap, and to suffer privation and hardship of all kinds without complaining."

"**T**HEN for the past two summers, Colin sent him to work on the river, where the work is hard, and the temptations are great." The priest paused and sipped at his wine. "I have known Colin Murchie for many years. I know that his whole life was wrapped up in that boy. It has been revealed to me in many ways, unsuspected by Colin, that beneath his hard exterior he has a softer side. And it was this softer side that he, himself, feared. He was afraid that if he kept the boy with him, he would favor him, and in countless ways, would ease his path, and make him that much less of a man. You can believe me, my friend, when I tell you that never a day passed when the boy was away from him, that Colin Murchie did not miss him—did not long to have him at his side. Yet so strong and so indomitable was his will, that he held rigidly to the course he had mapped out—because he believed it was best for the boy."

"Mightn't it be that he's been too tough on the kid? That in tryin' to make a man of him, he taught him to hate him?"

"No. Angus had a vast respect and admiration for his father. I do not know that he actually loved him, in the commonly accepted definition of filial love—but he certainly did not hate him; quite the reverse."

"Talkin' with him, anyone would think he was all white."



"A peculiar smile hovered on the sensitive lips of the priest. 'Or—all red,' he said.

"What!"

"During the long years I have labored in the outlands, I have noted a peculiar phenomenon for which I can offer no biological reason, nor can I conceive of any explanation for it. It is that the French blood, and the Indian blood seem to blend perfectly; while the Scotch blood never blends with the Indian. It mixes—but does not blend. Mix alcohol and water, and you have a perfect blend—a liquid that is neither the one nor the other. Mix oil and water, and you have no blend—merely a mixture—half oil, half water. And each ingredient will find its own level—the water beneath, the oil above.

Your French metis is a true metis, a mixture of the bloods, and a mixture of the characteristics of the two races. Your Scotch metis, is in reality, no metis at all. He is at times, all white man—at other times, all Indian."

"H-u-u-u-m, an interestin' fact, Father—if it is a fact. An' certainly worth knowin'."

"I do not state it as a fact—merely as a theory, based on observation."

"You've had a lot more experience than I have, an' a lot better chance to observe—bein' able to watch 'em from the time they're kids. Take this Angus, now—ain't it jest possible that he went Injun, up there on the post, an' shot Colin, himself. Is he tryin' to put the finger on Larue because he knows that Larue is already in bad with the police?"

"No," smiled the priest. "Not a chance in the world. I wondered if that thought were not playing in the back of your mind. You may dismiss it. I have known Angus intimately ever since he was a baby. I have seen him many times in his white personality, and many times in his red. I have watched him closely, and I know that, in either personality, his most distinctive characteristic is his sense of justice. Time and again, here at the mission, his outraged sense of justice has brought his wrath upon the head of the offender." The good Father paused and smiled. "There were times when he had to be taken to task for his swift and militant remedial measures—black eyes and bloody noses, when the white man was in the ascendancy. Cunning, patient reprisals when the Indian blood was up. Upon investigation I would always find that he had a good reason for his act—the hard task was to teach him to refer the reprisal to the proper authority, instead of taking the matter into his own hand."

"Quick tempered, eh?"

"On the contrary, in all the years I have known him, I have never known him to lose his temper. At all times he

holds himself under perfect control. You may rest assured that he did not kill his father. Had he done so, he might, conceivably, have fled to escape punishment, but he would never have sought to place the blame on the shoulders of another. His sense of justice is too deep-rooted for that."

"I S'POSE you're right, Father. There ain't no man's opinion I've got more respect for. You know more about the North, an' the folks that lives in it, than I'll ever know. There's one thing I meant to ask him about, an' forgot. I wonder what the old man meant—what he said about the flag, jest before he died—that Angus wouldn't be needin' the new one—that the old one would do. Jest MURCHIE, or somethin' like that?"

"I think I can explain that. Colin left

word with me here early in the summer, that if I saw Angus to tell him to be at the post on August seventh if it was possible.

"He told me that the seventh was the lad's birthday — that he would be twenty-one years old; and that he was, on that day, taking him into partnership. Years ago, he told me, when Angus was but a baby, his mother embroidered the name of the firm that was to be when the boy came of age—MURCHIE AND SON—on a field of crimson silk. That flag was to have been raised above the post that day. It was for that, Colin was cutting and peeling the pole. It is too bad that Colin could not have lived to see it."

"I'll say it is!" agreed Downey heartily. "An' if that damn Larue—beggin' you're pardon, Father—killed him, you bet he'll pay!"

(Part II in the Next SHORT STORIES)

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GREAT SCOUNDREL

By

GORDON YOUNG

*Author of "Cap'n Bill Goes to
Lalebo," "Daughter of the
Mandarin," etc.*



I

CAPTAIN JACK HESIOD was sharing a bottle of wine under the shade of the trellised vines outside the Café Napoleon, on the island of Tupulo, with a Frenchman that he did not like.

The Frenchman was Jules Plantoine. He was fat, red of face, with little evil pig-like eyes, and a mustache that drooped over his puffy mouth as if to mask its cruelty.

Hesiod had cold blue eyes, red hair, and a hard name. He was saying things that made Plantoine sweat; and Plantoine kept scratching at the calf of his right leg where an insect had bitten him as he slept. He wore sandals and no socks; and, as he could not find a ready answer, he would

lean over and scratch hard to have more time to think.

A sullen barefoot native slip-slapped up to the table and spoke to Hesiod. "Cap, ol' Tolman he wanta see you at his house queek!"

Hesiod stared at the sullen Maake, then hit the table with smack of palm. "No. Go back and tell the damned old thief that I want nothing to do with him!"

Maake scowled and backed off. Then Plantoine spread his puffy palms, saying, "Many men would be glad to visit old Tolman's house. He has a pretty wife and guards her closely. Ah, it is something to have seen her, close!"

"I've never seen her. But I'll say that your taste in beauty isn't mine." Hesiod sipped wine, eyed Plantoine above the glass brim. "You and Tolman used to be

as close as two ends of a rope in a hard knot. Was it over her that you had a falling out?"

Plantoine took a pose, looked severe. "Not at all! But he is, as you just said, a thief!"

"And what the hell do you call yourself?" Hesiod's eyes were hard to meet. "Some months ago you bought of me a fine cargo of pearl shell. And you have delayed payment with promises that I choose to call lies. You sold the shell, Plantoine. And here I am again on Tupulo. And I will be paid! I give you three days. No more! Three days from now, if I'm still unpaid, I'll go to sea, and you'll go with me! And we'll sail to Noumea, where I'll ask the governor if he has ever missed anybody from his collection of convicts with a face like yours! For I've a great suspicion," Hesiod went on coolly, "that you are such a rogue as would never be sent to prison—except for life! So being out, you have escaped."

Plantoine's big face was too red from brandy and sunburn to turn pale, and he sat like a dead man bolstered upright, and he spoke with a shaken voice:

"Monsieur! My honor—my—"

"Never mind your honor. Let us speak of your record! An hour ago I was wondering how the devil I was going to have my money out of you. I've seen too many ankles scarred by leg irons not to know what to think when one is stretched out before my eyes. So in the future, when you scratch in public, be careful not to raise your trousers' leg! Now what do you say?"

Plantoine muttered asthmatically, "I will pay! Oh I will pay you—in—full!" His little evil piglike eyes gleamed, but Hesiod carelessly did not notice.

II

THAT evening Captain Hesiod again idled at the Café Napoleon and Madame Duoy, the buxom proprietress, sat

at the table and chatted gayly with him.

In came a tall, thin cockeyed Eurasian known as Harri, whose tailored whites were spotless. He spoke politely in a thin voice:

"Captaine Hisiod, Meestare Tolman ver' um-bly ree-queests the on-or of your pree-sence at his un-worth-ee hoam."

Hesiod eyed this head clerk of Tolman's. "You know what I think of Tolman. And of *you*!"

The Eurasian bowed imperturbably, and his thin womanish voice wheedled. "Captaine, it iss not lak the last time, if you please. Meestare Tolman iss ver' seek an' he mus' see you."

Hesiod's ice-blue eyes could stare at a man for a long time without winking. "Go to the devil. Both of you. Especially you!"

The Eurasian walked off stiffly.

Madame Duoy lifted her brows. "He has the bad eyes of one who would use a knife in the dark! Have you no fear, my captain?"

"Less fear of his knife than his tongue. Politeness from one who hates you is dangerous. Tolman used to be rich. But with that fellow around for a Jonah—where did he come from?"

Madame fluttered a hand. "Monsieur Tolman picked him off the streets of Singapore some years ago and gave him food and clothes, for you must know that in spite of his gaunt look, this Tolman has the kind heart. But this Harri is not well liked for, as you can see, there is a sly evilness in his face!"

Hesiod nodded. "I have heard that Tolman got his young wife in much the same way. If not off the street, off the beach—which is just as bad."

Madame wagged her head. "That is not true. Non! She came to Tupulo with a wretched troupe of actors and, having the prettiest face, Monsieur Tolman, who is three times her age, out of the kindness of his heart, married her. She is only a child. I have seen her often under the

great wide hat that keeps the sun from her face as she takes the air in a carriage that Harri sometimes drives."

"I wouldn't want him around any wife of mine."

"*Non?*" Madame leaned forward on plump elbows. "And will you tell an old friend why you used such short words just now with that ugly Harri?"

"Certainly. You know, Madame, that I am the biggest scoundrel in the South Seas?"

Madame's laughter fluttered into a gay "La, la, la! So I have heard you say!"

"When I visited Tupulo about four months ago, Tolman sent for me, much as he has today. He and this Harri then proposed that I take their rotten brig to sea and sink it for insurance. I said that I would—gladly!—if they would go along so that I could batten them under the hatch. I could see that it was this Harri who had first thought that I was such a thief that I could be hired to steal for others. But no, Madame. I do my own stealing for myself only!"

III

ABOUT 3 o'clock in the morning Hesiod rowed out to his schooner and found the anchor watch asleep from too much whiskey; but the mate was also dead drunk in a scupperway.

"You worthless old lag," Hesiod growled. "This time I will throw you overboard!"

He heaved up the old seaman and, with as much gentleness as if carrying a child, took him down the ladder. Then he almost dropped the mate on the deck for a pretty girl was asleep in a chair under the dim lantern in the cabin.

He dumped the mate into a bunk and went back to bend low for a good look at the girl. She wore a *parau* and slept with her head thrown back.

A mere child she seemed, with the sort of beauty not often seen in the islands.

Her white face had been barely tinted by the tropical sun so that her cheeks had something of a pearl shell's luster, and her silken hair was golden.

He was stooping over her when the girl awakened with a startled look. She said,



"Oh!" and got out of the chair quickly, then smiles flitted uneasily.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Captain Hesiod, excuse me, please. I am Avis Tolman, and I went to sleep. It was so long, waiting."

"And what are you doing here?"

"Oh, please, my husband wants to see you, quick."

"He does, does he? First, that ugly Maake. Then that Harri. Now you! What does he want!"

She had a sweet, flute-like voice and it trembled a little. "He is very sick, Captain Hesiod, and must see you, please! You will come with me?"

"What does he want?"

"I do not know, Captain."

"I think you are lying. But most women do when they want their way, so we won't quarrel over that. Sit down."

Hesiod threw his cap at the sea chest,

ran fingers through his hair, eyed the girl. She was a pretty trinket, and he suspected a childish mischief from the look of her eyes, but now she was too nervous to be mischievous. A beautiful slim child, and old Tolman was a gaunt, dark, wrinkled, somber and dishonest man.

"You will come with me, Captain?"

Hesiod thumbed tobacco in the bowl of a pipe, struck a match. "Will he beat you if I don't?"

Avis laughed at him. "Of course not! He is a nice man and loves me!"

"Not much of a nice man to send a kid like you, at a time of night like this, out to a ship like mine. Bad lot of boys for a crew. Cannibals. They might have put you into a frying pan!"

"I am not afraid of natives. I was born in the islands!"

"But what of *me*? Don't you know that I'm a hard case? I'm likely to carry you off?"

His teasing made her less nervous. With an upward glance from under lowered lashes, she said, "Maybe that is what we want, Captain!"

"So? But I leave husbands ashore! Tell me all about it."

She sat on the arm of the heavy chair and one slim leg dangled. "You will come with me to see my husband?"

"It's likely that I'll go. Which shows exactly why I oughtn't have anything to do with that Tolman. He knows too well how to get around me. What does he want?"

AVIS said that she did not know, but Hesiod was sure that she knew all right. He asked how old she was. She studied, then said, "Twenty-five"; but he called her a little liar. She laughed and admitted that she did not know.

She had lived in the islands all of her life. One day when she was very small, the Englishman that she had called "father" went away, and her mother cried, broke furniture, and made Avis swear to

hate all men, always. Then she had gone with her mother to Sydney and joined a troupe of people who wandered about the islands, singing and dancing. Her mother died and Avis was in bondage. Everybody beat her and hated her, probably because she was pretty and young, and reminded them that they were old, ugly, wretched.

They came to Tupulo and Mr. Tolman by chance saw, through her flimsy dress, that her shoulders were covered with black welts. He took Avis to his house, then went to the manager of the troupe. The manager at once ran with a bruised face to complain to Major Dubonnet, the governor.

Major Dubonnet had Avis brought to him, looked at her face, at her shoulders, and, being an officer and a gentleman, threw the manager into the new jail with a three months' sentence to work on roads.

The next day Tolman married her and kept her very much as a willing prisoner because he told her, and she believed, that all men were just about as bad as the manager.

But tonight he had told her that Captain Hesiod was one of the few honest men in this part of the world, and that she need not be afraid, but must go alone to his schooner and persuade him to come to the house where he, Tolman, lay in bed, helpless.

"Alone? Then how did you get out here?" Hesiod asked.

"I swam."

"Liar. Your *paraui* is dry."

Avis laughed. "I tied it about my head."

His nod admitted that might be, for, if she were island born, she was probably sister to a fish. "Nobody knew that you came?"

SHE shook her head, saying, "Only Harri and Maake," as if their knowing were not important.

"Do you like that Harri?"

"Of course I like Harri! He is good to me."

"I'm not so sure that you know when somebody is being good to you. Was there a drunken man on the deck when you came? The mate?"

"Um-hm. So I come here to wait and I got sleepy. Please, you like me, Captain Hesiod, don't you?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"If you like me, you will come." She stood up and held out a hand, as if to lead him away.

"I can't like any girl that makes the fool of me that you'll likely be doing if I let you pull me by the nose to old Tolman. So tell me, what does he want?"

"Will you come if I tell you?"

"You tell me, then I'll tell you."

"My husband made me promise not to tell you. He said if you knew that you would not come. But if you *do* promise to come, then it will be all right for me to tell you. Don't you see? So you will promise?"

"All right."

"Honest promise?"

"Honest."

Avis came earnestly close and her eager face was lighted with coaxing anxiety. "He is a very sick man and has oh so much trouble! It is that beast of a Plantoine that has made him worry and lose money!"

"Ho, so? It will be a pleasure to help Tolman if breaking Plantoine's neck does any good!"

"Please, Captain Hesiod, my husband wants for you to take him and me and Harri away, and not have anybody know. Will you?"

"Not much I won't. You go tell him he has a ship or two of his own."

"No!" Her cry was shrill and angry. "He has nothing now but some pearls that he keeps under his pillow. And he will give them to you if you—"

"I'll not." Hesiod backed to the chest and sat down. "There's some flummery in his trying to dodge off the island. I've trouble enough with the French as it is.

Tolman can do his own running away. What's the reason?"

"It is that old Plantoine who has taken everything away from my husband! And that old Plantoine, he loses and loses at gambling and makes my husband give him more and more!"

Hesiod grunted, clicked the pipe stem against his teeth. "Tolman is rogue enough himself to know all along that Plantoine was a cutthroat! Too bad. I've no love of Tolman. Less of Plantoine. But I'll have nothing to do with sneaking him off Tupulo. Go tell him so!"

"But you promised me!"

"Not to do what you want, I didn't."

"You did, too! You promised to come with me. That is what I want!"

"That—yes. I did. So, all right. Come along."

IV

IT WAS dark when they left the beach with Avis' small warm fingers holding to Captain Hesiod's hand. It was bright dawn when they came to the old two-story house that stood on three-foot piles of coral rock.

The barefoot Maake was sitting on the veranda steps. He did not look sullen now, but grinned smugly as if he understood a thing or two, and stood up with beckoning twist of arm. "You come along with me, Cap. I take you to *Mista* Tolman."

"You go with Maake," said Avis; and to Maake, "You see! He did come with me!" She ran lightly into the house.

Hesiod followed Maake up the gloomy stairs and went through a door that the ugly native opened for him.

"You wait, Cap. *Mista* Tolman he call you. I go tell 'im you come."

Hesiod looked about the room, saw nothing of interest. He sat down, took out his pipe, and fell to musing on the prettiness of Avis.

He heard a weak cry and arose. It vaguely had the sound of some one calling

to him, in a muffled voice, from the next room. Hesiod went to the door that led to the next room, opened it slightly, spoke. "Tolman?" There was no answer, so he opened the door wider and stood there.

The split bamboo shades were down and it was too dim to see clearly. There was the sick room odor of medicine. He said, "Tolman?" again and went nearer the bed where the whiteness of sheets gleamed in the gloom.

A long gaunt form lay face up. Hesiod stooped close, then muttered oaths amazed. He put out a hand but drew it back, and, turning quickly to a window, jerked up the blind, all the while looking backwards.

A knife had been driven into Tolman's breast. Hesiod bent low, frowned at the knife's black handle, touched it, then straightened with a slow deep breath. It was his own knife.

The door from the hall into Tolman's room opened. Maake, with eyes big as tea-cups, stared for a moment before he yelled and ran. In a half minute commotion stirred through the house. Maake was bawling, "Cap Hes'd he kill masta!"

Avis came flying and gave Hesiod a horrified look, then she fell to her knees by the bed and sobbed as she clutched at the gaunt dead man.

Then Harri came, looking a bit frowsy in rumpled pajamas and with uncombed hair. His twisted eyes gleamed hatefully. "You keel my mas-tare!" His thin womanish voice had a hysterical screech; and he struck a pose as if about to attack Hesiod, who remained perfectly still, glowering as suspicions took shape.

Harri looked at the floor, then stooped with out-reaching snatch. "The pu-urls!" His eyes darted over the mat, then he went to the bed, thrust his thin hand in under the pillow, jerked the pillow from under the dead man's head. "You thief! You have roab heem! You keel heem an' roab heem!"

Hesiod laughed, not pleasantly. "By God, I'll say you two played it well! Got

my crew drunk to steal that knife. So be it! But we'll have some truth right now!"

He stepped forward with a look that made Harri jump aside; then Hesiod put out his hand to take the kneeling Avis by her golden hair, meaning to jerk her to her feet and shake out a confession. But she looked up. Her pretty face was distorted with anguish, and there was no fear. "Oh, Captain Hesiod, I know that you did not do this thing! I know that



you did not! But oh who did it, and *why, why, why?*" She fell forward, sobbing.

Hesiod turned to get his hands on Harri, but Harri sprang back into the hallway, ready to run.

V

MAJOR DUBONNET came, accompanied by marines.

The Major had grown fat in colonial service. He wore a black spade beard that gave a martial air, but his blue eyes were tired and tolerant.

After listening, Major Dubonnet summed up his opinion in a rather weary voice, spoke directly to Hesiod:

"It is known that Madame Tolman spent the night on your schooner. What she says of why she went to visit you may be true, but most likely it is not, for a woman must protect her name. And what

even if Tolman, who could not leave his bed, did send for you? He was very jealous of his wife, and it would not be the first time, that a wife's lover was summoned to talk over matters with her husband.

"Maake heard an outcry in his master's room and came to the door, but at first was afraid to open it. When he did open the door, he saw you with your hand on the knife. And it is *your* knife."

Hesiod thrust out his right hand. "Would I need to use a knife on a sick man?"

"In a passion," Major Dubonnet answered judicially, "one does not know what one is using. And as for the suspicions that you have tried to throw upon Harri—you must know that it is common evidence of guilt for the one who has committed the crime to accuse another. If Harri had wished to kill his master, what easier than a drop or two of poison, and who would ever have suspected that it was not the doctor's bad medicine?"

"It is of no importance that the pearls, which are said to have been under Tolman's pillow, have not been found on your person. Perhaps there were no pearls, or only the single one picked from the floor where you may have dropped it in your haste. But there is the knife. It is your own. Your initials are upon the handle. It was driven into Monsieur Tolman's heart when you were alone with him."

"But this man was dead, long dead—his body was cold!" said Hesiod.

Major Dubonnet shook his head, unimpressed. "Being a sick man, his body was cold while he lived. And it is easier to believe that you arranged to have your own crew drunk, so they would not know of Madame Tolman's visit, than that an enemy would go to so much trouble in order to steal your knife, and stab the husband with it while you waited in the next room—as you would have me think. Enemies are seldom so obliging to a wife's lover!"

VI

HESIOD was put into the small one room jail that had been built of coral blocks, with high narrow windows through which a man could scarcely crawl, even if the iron bars were removed. A marine paced back and forth before the door, and all Tupulo came to stare at Hesiod.

That evening Plantoine slipped coins into the sentry's palm and was permitted to put his fat face against the bars of the jail door, where he called softly.

Hesiod, not moving from the stool in a far corner, said, "If you are a wise man, Plantoine, you will pay what you owe, even though I am here. I can use money; for with money enough, one can get out of any jail."

"Come closer, my friend," Plantoine urged. "Let us talk and perhaps arrange something. I can tell you that it will do no good for you to get out of the jail without Major Dubonnet's permission. Out of fear that your crew might help you escape, he has removed them from your schooner and put two marines on board. Your mate has been sent to another ship. He told Major Dubonnet that last night a native brought out whiskey and said that it was sent as a present from you.

"He did not see the native's face closely, and would not know him again. So you, my friend, stand on a slippery place with a rope about your neck!"

"And I," said Hesiod, coming to the door, "do not see tears in your eyes!"

"Oh but, my friend," Plantoine urged, "I do believe that the cutthroat Harri did that thing. Who better than he knew that Madame Tolman, whom he loves, had been sent to bring you? And that, since she is a pretty woman, you would come! He could have murdered the sick man with your knife, knowing that you must be suspected. Ah, the world is filled with evil cunning! And this Harri knew of the

pearls that Tolman concealed to evade his honest debts!"

Hesiod asked coldly, "And how do you propose to evade your honest debts? Remember, I have a tongue. Major Dubonnet has ears. And you have scars on your ankle!"

"Name of God, if you please, not so loud! It is of that I wish to speak."



"All right, speak!"

"Monsieur, I have not at hand the money I owe you. But I am a man of resource and not a fool. Therefore, Monsieur, if I devote myself to proving that you are innocent, and convince Major Dubonnet that it was the villain Harri, may we come to an understanding?"

"Call the debt paid, and keep my mouth shut about certain scars?"

"Precisely, Monsieur!"

"Agreed."

The marine came to the door and told Plantoine to stand aside as a woman with a basket, that was covered with a napkin, came out of the darkness. It was Madame Duoy. The sentry unlocked the door and politely permitted her to go into the cell. Police matters were conducted informally on peaceful Tupulo.

"Major Dubonnet," she said, "has given me permission to send your dinner every day, and this evening I have brought it myself because I want to tell you, my friend, that I do not believe that you did what they say. I know that you are an honest man. Also, I know that if you were a scoundrel, as you are pleased to call yourself, you would be such a scoundrel as arranged the thing too cleverly to be suspected!"

Then Madame Duoy began to cry a little and put her arms about Hesiod's neck. He patted Madame's plump cheeks.

The marine, out of his own thoughtfulness, brought in a lantern and lingered to gaze hungrily at the good things with which Madame had filled the basket.

When she left, Hesiod invited the marine to have a glass of wine and a piece of roast chicken.

The marine said, "Monsieur, I, too, do not believe what they say of you, for I am of the same opinion as Madame, who is an intelligent woman. But will you please assure me, Monsieur, that you are not using the friendliness of sharing your dinner to make your escape? I would be severely punished!"

"Escape? Where the devil could I escape? Your Major Dubonnet is a forethoughtful man. And besides, to escape would seem to admit that I murder sick men!"

There was only one glass, but a whole chicken. The marine stood by the door and ate and drank. He wiped his greasy fingers on his trousers and said, "Monsieur, it is a pleasure to be with a gentleman, even in jail. I shall arrange to stand watch here again tomorrow evening. If you but knew, the food in our barracks does not come from the Café Napoleon!"

VII

THE next morning Harri came to stand before the door and hiss, "You deed keel my mas-tare!" And to scream, "You try to mak pee-pee theenk I deed a cru-ul theeng lak that!"

"You did, damn you!"

Harri went away howling, as if noise must be taken for innocence.

Plantoine came in the afternoon. "I have talked long with Major Dubonnet, and he begins to see that there are other facts than those he first believed. Harri

is making so much talk of how he loved old Tolman that many people grow doubtful. Tomorrow, I may have even better news."

It was well after dark that evening when a native boy came with the basket that Madame Duoy sent. The marine opened the door and brought it in, placed it on the table by the lantern.

Hesiod, having more to trouble him than hunger, smoked in the corner on his stool while the marine took off the napkin, eagerly set out the food. The marine took up the bottle of wine, regarded the label by lantern light.

"Ah. Tonight we have merely claret. Last night it was fine Burgundy!"

"Unfit to drink, I am sure," said Hesiod.

The marine said, "I shall soon tell you." He pulled the cork, poured a glassful, drank thirstily, and made a face. "It is not the best claret." But he poured another glass and drank it. Then he eyed the glass and pronounced judgment. "No, it is not good wine." He put a slice of pork loin on bread with tart jelly and munched.

Hesiod smoked with eyes closed.

The marine put both hands to his stomach and began to groan. He fell to the ground, writhing, and his words were both prayers and oaths. "The wine! The wine! That wretched Duoy has poisoned us! Name of God, I am dying!"

In no time at all he was quiet.

VIII

HESIOD cautiously slipped out of the shadows near the kitchen of the Café Napoleon. It was the hour when the last of the diners were about through.

He knew that there would presently be a clamor when the sentry relief came to the jail and, having no time to lose, Hesiod entered the kitchen and said to the cook, "Tell Madame that I am here."

Madame came with a flurrying bustle and joy on her plump face. "Ah, you have been released!"

"Madame, tonight, who prepared the basket of dinner?"

"Oh, I! And why do you look so? What is wrong, please?"

Hesiod brought the bottle of claret from behind his back. He held it out to her. "I have come to complain of the wine, Madame!"

"Why, Monsieur! Ah, this? *This* did not come from my cellar!"

"It was in the basket, Madame."

"In the basket?"

"And ~~poisoned~~, Madame. The marine drank of it and died!"

Madame threw up her hands and ran through many unlady-like French oaths. She was astonished and angered and a little bewildered, but she had made her own way in the world, and was not so fluttery as she appeared.

She hurried out of the kitchen and returned with a hand on the back of a native boy's neck. He terrified by her roughness and temper, began to cry. Madame slapped his face until he had something to cry about; and, after many denials that he knew how the wine could have been changed, he at last admitted that Harri had met him on the way to the jail; and Harri had given him twenty francs to run with a message. So the basket was put under a bush while he made off as fast as his legs would go, because twenty francs were not to be picked up every day for a little errand.

"So you see, my Captain, it was that sly evil Harri!" said Madame. "I will go at once to Major Dubonnet and tell him—"

Hesiod said, "No, do not do that. Let us wait until the relief sentry comes to the jail and makes an outcry. I can use my free hour. I believe that the most likely place to find Harri will be at the Tolman house."

IX

HESIOD approached the house on the run but slackened his pace to tip-toeing caution as he came near the ver-

anda. The front room windows upstairs were lighted, and he entered the house stealthily.

The old stairs creaked under his feet. He went along the hallway and near the door he could indistinctly hear voices.

Hesiod flung open the door, stood there a moment, stepped in. By his sudden entrance he caught the insolent grin on the face of the ugly Maake who sat on Avis' bed. Harri was there also, lying on the floor, bound and gagged. The fat Plantoine was bowed caressingly above Avis who sat in a chair, crying.

Maake leaped up with a shout and started for a window as if to fling himself out of it, clear to the ground. Hesiod caught up a chair by the back and swung it. A leg and rung were shattered on Maake's head and he dropped as if shot.

Hesiod turned on Plantoine, then threw the broken chair aside. There was a sheath knife on Plantoine's hip, but no fight in his heart. His fat red face was helpless with fright and bewilderment.

Avis jumped from her chair, stumbled against Hesiod and clung to him.

"A man of resource and not a fool, Plantoine? So I see!"

Avis' small hands were beating Hesiod, partly in hysteria, partly to make him listen to her flurried words. They were not entirely coherent, but they told that Plantoine had found out, somehow, that Tolman was an escaped convict from Australia; and Plantoine's extortion had increased mercilessly until all that Tolman retained were some choice pearls, selected over a long period.

"He wanted you to take us all away, quick, for this beast of a man had learned of the pearls!" she said. "And it was this beast of a man and Maake who planned the crime when they were sure that I would persuade you to come ashore!"

Harri, however, had believed that it was Hesiod who killed his master, so he had readily listened to Plantoine, who pre-

pared the poisoned wine and told Harri how to arrange to substitute it, secretly.

"Tonight," Avis explained hurriedly, "Maake made a boast of how he had thrown a pearl on the floor to fool everybody, and if Harri had not found it, he would have pretended to find it himself.



That let Harri know the truth, and he wanted to kill this Maake and this Plantoine. So they tied him up to take him on the ship that Plantoine has ready to go away; and they would have killed Harri at sea, so that nobody would ever know what became of him. And this beast of a Plantoine had come here tonight to take *me* with him!"

Hesiod stared at Plantoine. "So Tolman was also an escaped convict? And you were afraid that I would bleed you as you bled him?"

"Monsieur, I will give you half of everything! I have a schooner ready for sea. All I could put into money and goods is there. We will go away together at once and share equally!"

"Where are the pearls?"

Plantoine put a hand to his belly, indicating the belt he wore under his shirt. "Monsieur, we are men of the world!"

"Right!" said Hesiod, and hit him on the jaw. All of Hesiod's angered weight was behind the blow.

Plantoine thumped to the floor, lay awkwardly sprawled and as motionless as if dead.

Hesiod cut the lashings on Harri's ankles and wrists, jerked out the gag, helped him to his feet.

Harri put out his hand with cringing timidity. "I am sor-ree, Captaine Hesiod, by my mas-tare was ver' good to me!"

Hesiod at first gave him a scowling look, then took the thin womanish hand. "Devotion is the best substitute for honesty that I know of. I don't like your way of evening scores, my friend; but if you had guessed right, your justice would not have been so very bad. But you poisoned the wrong man.

"This fellow—" Hesiod gave Plantoine a prod with his toe"—is coming to life. I'll tear a sheet and tie him up as a present for Dubonnet!"

Hesiod turned to the bed, threw back covers, and ripped at a sheet with Avis

close beside him, touching him, as if to reassure herself of her security. Suddenly she clutched his arm fearfully and screamed.

Hesiod turned quickly and saw Harri straighten up above Plantoine. Harri folded his arms and lifted his head. The knife out of the sheath on Plantoine's hip was hilt deep in Plantoine's fat neck.

"No man was ev-are so good to me as my mas-tare," said Harri calmly in his thin womanish voice. "Now any pun-eshment that Major Dubon-net mak' on me, I weel con-seed-dar it a plee-sure!" He bowed to Hesiod. "I know nqw that you weel tak' good caare of my mas-tare's wife!"



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HANGMAN'S TREE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Quicksilver," "The Gold Buddha," etc.



MOE GANZ, president of Para-Art Studios, threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "If it ain't one thing it's another," he moaned.

His secretary nodded sympathetically. "What does that painter feller want this time?"

"I think he wants to quit his job," the girl answered.

"Phooie! And didn't I tell him he couldn't quit his job?" Moe fumed. "Don't he know I don't take no for an answer. How many times do I have to tell him he can't quit."

"Maybe I had better go," Stan Dvorak, Para-Art's famous character actor suggested. "I see you're in a mood to jump all over some poor devil." He was dressed for his rôle as Chinatown's "night crawler"—a hideous, real life character, who picked up a living from tourists by crawling through the gutters and holding forth a soiled, ragged hat for nickels and dimes.

"Stick around," Moe answered, "maybe you'll give this artist feller the willies like you do me when you're dressed up like that. Besides, I should talk about your next picture. And another thing, while we're about it, this business of your bein' a detective has got to stop."

"Now I *am* shoving off," Stan declared.

"We've been over my love of criminal investigation many, many times."

"Hang around. I won't even mention it," Moe promised. He turned to his secretary. "Darlin', tell the mug to come in. As the copy book says, do today what you can put off until tomorrow and you'll be healthy, wealthy, happy and wise."

"Or something like that," Stan discreetly observed under his breath.

A thin, nervous fellow with the fine, bright light of a crusader in his eyes, entered the room. "Mr. Ganz," he said, "I'm really going to quit this time. You've talked me into staying on before, but now I'm determined to resign."

"Mr. Kenyon," Moe said, "this is Stan Dvorak. Maybe you ain't met him before. Maybe he ain't met you, but you painted some of the scenery for Dvorak's pictures." He smiled blandly. "Did you like them pictures, Stan?" he queried.

"I certainly did," Stan answered. "Mr. Kenyon did a swell job."

"See, Kenyon?" Moe triumphantly exclaimed. "A man like Stan Dvorak likes your work and you want to quit."

"But you don't understand, Mr. Ganz," Kenyon protested. "I want to do murals—something that will live. I have some ideas I would like to do in oils, on canvas."



*If a Man Is a Coyote
with the Soul of a Lizard—That's the Way
He Must Be Painted.*



"Paintin' pictures for art museums ain't a business," Moe argued. "Paintin' sets for Papa Moe, that's a business. Each week you get pay in the envelope. In art museums, you don't get nothin' for a hundred years, then some snooty mug peeks through his fist at your work and says, 'Great! Marvelous! This picture will live.' But I ask does that buy you clothes and square meals? No! A t'ousand times no. Be a nice, sensible boy, and paint scenery for Papa Moe. Marry even a nice girl. Buy clothes for her. Have a baby, or even a half dozen and then you'll have to forget this nonsense. Babies have to eat now; they can't eat glory that comes a hundred years from now. Ain't it the truth?" Moe Ganz beamed.

"You have been wonderful to me, Mr. Ganz. But there is going to be a great art exhibition. One of the greatest the West has ever known. Several old masters worth hundreds of thousands of dollars are to be brought to the west coast. And listen, Gerald, the great critic, is coming. I want him to judge my work. And to that end I must quit now and paint a mural I have in mind. You know Gerald, of course."

"Gerald?" Moe scratched his head thoughtfully. "What motion picture magazine does he write for? What does he say about Stan Dvorak's work?"

"He's not a critic of motion pictures," Kenyon explained. "He's a great art critic."

"One of them squinters, eh, who goes around peekin' through his fist?" Moe sniffed. "That ain't a business. That's a loafer's job."

"Nevertheless I am leaving Saturday noon," Kenyon informed his employer. "My work will be finished."

"What you goin' to live on?" Moe asked. "You was in debt when you come to me, you said so."

"I've paid off my debts. I owe the world nothing, Mr. Ganz. But I do owe myself the chance to have Gerald judge my work.

It may never come again," Kenyon explained.

THE eagerness, hope and confidence in Kenyon's eyes struck Stan Dvorak as being the finest thing he had seen for a long time. Something about it all tugged at his heartstrings. Here, he decided, was a man who had boundless faith in himself. And yet he was entirely free of the slightest conceit.

"You can't change his mind, Moe," the actor said suddenly, "so you might as well let him quit and hope he will come back to you when he has finished his work. He'll be a better man for it."

"As the bookkeeper's mother said, 'I've nursed an adder at my breast!' Even you turn against me, Stan, after all I've done for you. I'm licked. My body comes home on my shield. Phooie!"

"If you need any help," Dvorak said to Kenyon, "see Mr. John Stanley and tell him I sent you. You will be doing Stanley a favor. I am sure he would like to help, in a small way, with this masterpiece you have in mind. Will you do that?"

"I sure will, Mr. Dvorak," Kenyon promised.

EARLY the following evening Steven Kenyon approached John Stanley's apartment. He hadn't the remotest idea that John Stanley, handsome, idle man-about-town was Stan Dvorak, Para-Art's character actor. In fact a mere handful at the studio knew the two were the same man, as pictures of Dvorak out of character were never released. The public and his friends saw him only in his various roles.

Stanley admitted Kenyon and said, "I am expecting you. Stan Dvorak said you would likely call. Tell me something of your plans."

The sympathy and warmth of John Stanley's greeting put Steven Kenyon immediately at his ease and invited confidence. "I want to do a mural that will

live," Kenyon answered. "Something men will look at and talk about long after I'm gone. And I have a feeling the date of my departure isn't so far in the future. This feeling is one of the reasons for my haste."

"Why do you talk like that?" Dvorak inquired.

"Oh, I'm not morbid. My health isn't any too good," Kenyon explained, "and perhaps that is why I have the feeling, hunch or whatever you call it, that my days are numbered. Strangely enough, I'm not afraid. The fear in my heart is fear born of a job unfinished."

Stan Dvorak didn't laugh. He had known several men who had had a strange feeling they would die. And they had died within a few hours of the time they had predicted. In Kenyon's case he decided the man's nerves were tense. He had driven himself to finish the work in the studio in order to go ahead with his masterpiece. He wasn't himself. "Cigarette?" he offered.



"No," Kenyon answered. "I've been hitting them too strong lately. Later, thanks."

"Let's hear what you have in mind?"

"Well, it's a Western mural," Kenyon said without the slightest hesitation. "I hope to catch the spirit of adventure, the grim justice of the early West. You see I spent my boyhood in a part of the West where badmen still operated. There was a tree nearby—a big cottonwood—and it was called Hangman's Tree because a sheriff had used it several times to hang cattle rustlers. And, in turn, the rustlers had hanged a rancher or two to frighten neighboring ranchers."

"And did the neighboring ranchers frighten?"

"Not so that you could notice it," Kenyon replied. "It made them tougher than ever. In fact the rustlers were driven out of the country. I want to call my mural, Hangman's Tree."

"You go ahead," Dvorak directed, "and don't worry about the money part of it. In fact, I wish you'd move in. I won't be spending much time in this apartment the next month and I'd sooner have someone here than the place empty."

The company was going on location and Dvorak was going with it. "I wouldn't want to do that," Kenyon protested. "I'm a stranger to you."

Dvorak saw his quarters had won Kenyon in spite of his protest. Kenyon liked the peace and quiet of the place, the well chosen pictures on the walls, and the apartment's tasteful furniture. "This is just what you need, Kenyon," Dvorak insisted, "to permit you to do your best work. I'll not take no for an answer. When can you move in?"

"Tomorrow. You're sure I won't be in the way?"

"Nonsense. Just figure this is your home for as long a time as you want it. Knowing I'm having a small part in your success is all the pay I need," Dvorak assured him.

Two days later Steven Kenyon watched his friend depart. "One more thing," Dvorak said as a man waited for his bags, "don't take this critic business too seriously. After all, a critic's opinion is one man's opinion. Some of them need debunking."

"And one of that group, with all due respect to you, is Gerald. I've read many of his reports and later seen the art he criticized. He tears down when he should be building up. You paint what's in your heart, old man, and if Gerald don't like it, I'm betting the people will."

"You're encouraging," Kenyon replied, "nevertheless I can't agree that Gerald

should be debunked. If I win his approval, I'm made."

SEVERAL days later Kenyon set to work. He forgot the passing of time, hunger and everything else as he transferred to the gallery wall what was in his soul. To him it wasn't a mere picture of the West. It was the West. There were times when he half felt as if the horsemen would ride right out of the wall and gallop away, with swirling clouds of dust behind them.

There were moments when he was prepared to hear the men they were hanging voice his protest.

He lost weight and his nerves grew tense. "I'm getting down what I feel," he said toward the last, "there is character in my people's faces. If this should be great, I'll die happy. And yet, if a picture is great, the artist never knows it. It becomes great after he is dead. If my mural is great, I wonder if I'll know it in my heart?"

It was this state of mind, this uncertainty that brought forth his best. Two nights after Dvorak returned from location, the work was completed. "I just got in under the wire, Mr. Stanley," he said, "Gerald arrives tomorrow. I wish you would come down, not so much to see my work, as to look on a real old master. It is called, *At Dawning*, and it is worth five hundred thousand."

"I've heard of it," Dvorak answered. "And I'll look it over, but I'm more interested in your mural. What time shall we go?"

"Gerald will judge some new work, probably mine, at two o'clock," Kenyon said with a touch of reverence as he mentioned the critic's name. "I'd like to have you see him in action. If you can grasp his technique, you can really say you are grounded in the fundamentals of art."

Dvorak felt sorry for Kenyon when the committee escorting the great critic arrived. The artist shook all over and his

hands grew moist when the chairman signaled for him to approach. "Mr. Gerald," the chairman said, "I want to present Mr. Kenyon. We feel he has a brilliant future. And that recognition is much nearer than many people think. He does murals."

"Murals. Ah, indeed," Gerald said. He was stocky, important with an unruly shock of hair and fierce blue eyes, which glittered under shaggy brows. His slit of a mouth turned down at the corners in perpetual disapproval. "Your work?" he queried, jerking his thumb toward the mural.

"Yes," Kenyon answered. The committee held its collective breath, reporters poised their pencils, cameramen exploded bulbs as Gerald threw his head back and took in the details.

There was a long silence. A committee member coughed. His companions glared and the victim grew red to the ears. "Atrocious in conception," Gerald said, the words rolling joyously. "Execrable in execution. The faces? Ugh! No depth. No character. Drabs. Utter lack of expression. Kenyon, you haven't experienced the stark, age-old emotions of hate, love, fear. You haven't suffered. You haven't grieved." He emphasized each word by driving his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

The committee was impressed. The reporters scribbled notes. The photographers exploded bulbs.

"Thank you," Kenyon said. "I'll try some of the faces over this afternoon and tonight. Perhaps if you will be so generous to pause a moment tomorrow——"

"I will stop on my way to the train," the critic said with a generous gesture of his right hand. "Gladly. Embryonic art must be encouraged and—guided."

"Wasn't he great?" Kenyon asked Dvorak.

"Great—hell! He was posing from start to finish, thinking of himself. Not of you, nor your mural. He's a stuffed shirt."

"I don't agree at all. He is great. And he can make or break an artist."

"An artist or an actor makes or breaks himself," Dvorak insisted.

"What can you, a playboy, know of art and acting?" Kenyon demanded, losing his temper.

"I've been around actors a bit," Dvorak replied, repressing a grin.

"I'm sorry I flew off the handle," Kenyon said quickly. "Forgive me. You've been so kind. I don't want to be ungrateful."

"Forget it," Dvorak urged. "You're pretty tense. I've been that way myself. Let's go out and have a drink."

"I'm afraid not. I'm working some of the faces over," Kenyon answered.

As soon as he was alone he set to work. Time took wings. The gallery emptied, the night watchman came on duty, traffic on the street dwindled and the lights flicked on in homes and store windows.

"I must remember that your face must have depth and character," he said to one of the rustlers in his mural. "I happen to know you're a coyote with the soul of a lizard, but—"

A SLIGHT rustle startled Kenyon. He turned and looked into the blunt muzzle of a tommy gun. A well tailored individual with icy blue eyes and a face with plenty of depth and character held the weapon in hands as steady as the gallery's marble columns.

"Keep right along with your painting, buddy," he ordered. "You kind of complicate things. There was nobody painting pictures at eleven o'clock at night when we cased the place."

"I'm finishing up a job," Kenyon explained.

He was working on the south wall of the gallery. The intruder stood in a door cut through the west wall. He was beyond vision of anyone who might take a notion to pause before the north wall window and observe an artist at work. The east

wall had been reserved for another mural and was blank, except for an antique mirror.

If Kenyon glanced to the right he saw the tommy gun. If he looked to the left he saw the intruder and weapon reflected in the mirror. He wondered if the mirror were visible from the street and concluded it wasn't. It was tilted slightly to the south. "Just what do you want?" he asked.

"Never mind, keep painting," the man snapped. "And don't look at me. Folks passing by might wonder what you were looking at."

"Okay," Kenyon agreed, shifting his gaze to the mirror with the hope of reading something of the man's purpose in his face. "One thing is certain, you can't hope to sell any paintings you steal."

"No? They claim At Dawning is worth five hundred grand," the man calmly answered. "Well, if you get caught snatching a kid these days you're liable to set on a hot chair. But there's nothing in the law about snatching old masters. Art lovers should be good for a hundred grand to save At Dawning from the furnace."

"They'll laugh at you. A painting isn't a human being, you know," Kenyon said.

"If we cut an inch off the edge every day, mutilate it and send it to the trustees of this gallery," the intruder suggested with sublime confidence, "they'll raise the money in a hurry."

"You wouldn't do that," Kenyon protested in a scandalized tone. "That can never be replaced."

"Don't you think we won't do it if they don't come across," the other said. "Now go on with your daubing. And don't try writing any messages."

KENYON worked steadily, glancing occasionally into the mirror. The man was evidently the leader, as two others came frequently for orders. Kenyon could hear them burning their way into the steel vault that contained At Dawning, and other valuable paintings.

They had silenced the guard—perhaps murdered him. But he hoped the outside patrolman would pass and tap on the window as he had done on other occasions. He might contrive a signal. But luck was against him, the patrolman didn't pass.

Sometime after midnight the leader gestured with his weapon. "Come down off of there," he ordered. The others had cut At Dawning from its frame and doubtless taken it to a waiting car. The leader's eyes met Kenyon's. "Dead men tell no tales," he observed with a trace of insolence.

"I've known you had that in mind from the first," Kenyon said. "And I shall put you to the trouble of murdering me where I stand so the whole business will be visible from the street."

The leader's automatic pistol cracked before Kenyon had finished speaking. Even as the artist fell, a second bullet smashed the wall switch and plunged the room into darkness.

THE telephone in Stan Dvorak's apartment rang suddenly. "Mr. John Stanley speaking," he said.

"Mr. Stanley, this is Police Headquarters. Mr. Kenyon was murdered last night while he was painting. Lieutenant O'Grady thought you would like to know," the voice said. "The body is at the gallery."

"Thanks," Dvorak said quickly. He dressed, jumped into his car and roared to the gallery. O'Grady, who knew him also as Stan Dvorak, was waiting.

"You like to delve into crimes like this," O'Grady said, "and I've ordered things left just as they were. My theory is they stole At Dawning, found Kenyon here and finished him off to prevent identification."

"Logical," Dvorak answered, his eyes on the dead man. "Poor Kenyon. He wanted to do a picture that would live."

"From the expression on his face," O'Grady said, "I think the man died believing he had turned out a great piece of

work. The job was evidently done, because he signed his name at the bottom of the mural."

There was a bustle in one of the galleries and Gerald appeared. "I've just heard the terrible news!" he exclaimed, registering horror for the benefit of the newspaper men present. "They've stolen At Dawning."

"And that isn't all," the chairman of the committee in charge groaned. "I received a mysterious telephone call warning me to keep the police out of this and that unless a hundred thousand dollars, ransom money is raised, the picture will be destroyed."

"Terrible! Terrible!" Gerald moaned. "The money must be raised immediately."

The chairman turned to O'Grady. "Throw a net around the city," he pleaded, "and arrest them before they have escaped."

"No danger of their leaving," O'Grady answered. "They murdered the one man who could have identified them. They are going about their business, confident they'll not be detected. They are men, no doubt, we can pick up any time."



Dvorak watched them carry Kenyon's remains away. Then he turned to Gerald. "Well, he's dead. But he was working at his masterpiece and died content. What do you think of it?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

"A man should be generous when one has died," Gerald said with a lofty gesture. "But after all his work must stand strictly on its merits."

"I won't quarrel with you on that point," Dvorak said. "What do you think

of Hangman's Tree? He was working some of the faces last night, you know."

PENCILS were poised, a press cameraman exploded a bulb, catching the great critic in the act of examining the mural. "In time his murals might have shown promise. But his faces for the most part are not significant, nor individual. They lack emotion. The man was young. He hadn't lived, suffered, known stark fear nor great joy——"

"I told Kenyon the other day you were a humbug," Dvorak said bluntly, "that you put on an act and spilled beautifully rounded words to impress people. If you'll really look at those faces you'll find all of the depth of character, the individuality and emotion you want."

"Mr. Stanley," the shocked chairman said, "you forget yourself."

"Have it your own way, but study the face of the man they are hanging. It's the face of a man who knows he is going to die. But he is dying in his hour of triumph."

"He died believing he had done a fine piece of work?" the critic asked.

"That's only part. He died knowing, or at least believing, he had identified his murderers. The hanged man's face is—Kenyon's own face."

"So it is!" O'Grady exclaimed.

"So it is," the others murmured.

"The man holding the rope is the outlaw leader. You know who he is, O'Grady!"

"By Golly!" O'Grady exclaimed. "It's Noodles Kraemer dressed in a cowpuncher's outfit. And the two on the horses behind Kraemer are Suds Galloway and Silk Logan. We'll pick 'em up inside of an hour. And once we get 'em they'll tell where we can find At Dawning."

"Mr. Gerald," a reporter said, "won't you write a criticism of Hangman's Tree for my paper?"

"I'll write it," Dvorak cut in, "if Gerald will sign it? How about it, Mr. Gerald?" He turned to the uncomfortable critic, and waited for an answer, at the same time fishing in his pocket for a note pad and pencil.

"You write it," Gerald answered, graciously enough, "and I'll sign it."

"And now Mr. Gerald," the photographers were saying, "if you will pose just once more near the mural. We want all of it, as well as you."

Pencils hurried over pads, bulbs exploded, but Stan Dvorak hardly noticed what was going on. He was playing his first role as art critic, and he was really going to town.



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GHOST TOWN GUNS

By
LAWRENCE A. KEATING

CHAPTER I

BEAUTIFUL MIDASVILLE

THE bronc carried his head low as he trudged wearily through the rain-fogged night. Leather crunched moistly with his movements and the swaying weight of the tall, poncho-clad rider hunched forward in his saddle, peering ahead. The horse's hoofs made sucking sounds in the puddled, grass-grown, mountainside road that had not known the rumbling ox-drawn ore wagons for which it was built since that long-gone era of the gold boom.

"We won't make Bearpaw tonight, Buster," the rider reflected aloud. "But we ought to be gettin' down off this slope pretty soon. Maybe we can find some ranch'll take us in, down on the valley floor."

He draped his reins more loosely. The blur of the downpour permitted only vague impression, but the bronc could be trusted to sense what neither man nor horse could see. The rider kept staring ahead down the twisting, descending mountain road while rain spilled in a steady rivulet from the V-twisted front brim of his sombrero, spattered his chin and cheeks, and drummed monotonously on his poncho.

Behind him, up the craggy slopes of the



Prospector Hills, a series of lightning flashes were followed by thunder that resounded from peak to peak and thinned away in the lonely distances. Then, in a second-long purplish flare, the man spied rooftops half a mile below him.

He waited for another flash of lightning. It revealed two rows of buildings separated by a wide street, evidently the main street of a town. Behind the business structures huddled low sheds and barns, and, irregularly spaced beyond them, other buildings, doubtless homes.

The sight puzzled the rider. He had not expected to encounter a town yet, not for miles. And it seemed strange that no lights showed when the hour could not be more than seven-thirty or eight o'clock.

Flash Steele, Special State Ranger taking orders direct from Governor James J. Maridale, reviewed the directions given



him for reaching Bearpaw. A mining-grazing supply center, it stood, he had been told, at the foot of the east arm of the Prospector Hills. He was just now descending the west arm of the Hills, and there was a twenty-mile-wide valley which he must cross to reach the town.

His poncho rustled as he shrugged. "Maybe we lost the trail, eh, Buster? But—any port in a storm, sailors claim. Reck-on you'd like a good grain bait, wouldn't you, boy? And I'd sure appreciate to sink my fangs in a two-inch steak," he grinned. "And tuck myself into a nice iron bed with real sheets. Yes, sir!"

IT HAD been almost four weeks since they'd known those comforts. Four weeks of prowling the back country series after series of low mountain chains. Living outdoors, carrying flour and lard and

Flash Steele of the Rangers Lands in a Ghost Town—and Finds That Some of the Ghosts Are Mighty Active

bacon on a borrowed pack horse, but beyond that living off the land. It was a matter of nabbing two counterfeiters who had killed a U. S. Marshal. Governor Maridale's telegraphed order to Steele to hunt down the pair had proved how wrathful he was. Big Jim indignantly regarded the killing as a blot on the state's record. So he had put his cowboy-garbed Special Ranger on the trail.

Counterfeiting was over for those two men. One had died in the gun battle that ended in capture of his comrade. The survivor already was in custody of a special Federal agent. That case was closed so far as concerned Steele, so he was heading for Bearpaw half expecting to find a letter awaiting him containing orders for some new quest.

As his bronc covered the half-mile downward, he kept watching that dark town ahead in successive lightning flashes. Reaching the mouth of the main street and continuing another hundred yards, he finally brought his horse to a halt. For a moment Steele sat his saddle in the dreary rain, gazing about, wondering again why there was no light anywhere.

"Pretty sleepy place, Buster. Not even a drink emporium goin' so's a man can irrigate his throat."

He shifted the heavy cartridge belt and forty-five Colt under his poncho. From long habit his fingers toyed with that fake

cartridge fourth from the left of the buckle of his loop belt. It held no powder, but a letter written just before he took up the hunt for those counterfeiters. It was an exact copy of other letters before it, each on onionskin paper as this was, each in its turn tightly rolled up and stuffed into a copper shell. Some had been burned by unbelieving rascals when they had temporarily held the whip-hand. Some of the letters had been derisively torn to bits.

But in the end he had silenced every man who dared to defy that hand-written authorization from Governor Maridale. Some of the defiant ones were sleeping the long sleep. Others labored and repented in La Chola prison. Few of the men he had pursued the last two years were still at large, and the wise ones among them had changed countries for their health.

Steele turned in his saddle to stare this way and that. Queer, why this settlement was so dark and bleak-looking. There wasn't a horse at either of the broken hitchrails that edged the plank sidewalks. The stores and saloons on either side of the main street, he saw now, showed signs of neglect.

Yes, every building was empty. The whole town was deserted.

"Ghost town," he nodded slowly. "Nothin' alive here any more but a few optimistic pack rats. That's why the sheriff at Buckhorn didn't think to mention it when he told me how to get where I'm goin'. Yes, it's a ghost town—and plenty ghostly!"

He urged Buster on toward a vacant lot on the south side of the street. "Ought to be able to find shelter, anyhow. My blankets are dry, and if there's a whole roof in town I can sleep comfortable. But first, Buster, we'll find you a nice, dry horse hotel."

As he crossed the sidewalk, the horse gingerly picking its footing among rotted and broken boards, a flash of lightning

drew Steele's attention to paint smeared on the broken windows of a saloon. He waited, but the next blaze of light was too feeble to read the crude lettering. Curiosity overcame him then, and swinging from his saddle, he walked nearer with a rustling of his dripping poncho.

STEELE brought a match from his corduroy coat pocket, rubbed it on dry wood, and cupped the red flare in his hands. Studying the vivid yellow daubs on the hazy glass, he cocked his head in surprise. Before the match died he read the sign once more.

*Closed Till—?
Boom's Busted, Stranger!
Anyhow, we shur made money while
it lasted! This here is
beautiful Midasville.*

The sardonic humor of the notice brought a slow grin to Steele's lips. Resetting his sombrero, he reached for Buster's reins and led him on through the vacant lot to the alley. Optimism certainly was strong in the makeup of the owner of that saloon building, to prompt him to paint such a message on a structure that must have cost a tidy sum to erect in the boom days. But evidently he was satisfied. He had "shur made money while it lasted."



"Beautiful Midasville," Steele murmured. "Closed up till Judgment Day, I shouldn't wonder!"

He stood staring up and down the alley. There was little lightning to help now, but he could make out sheds in either

direction. Dragging Buster, he passed several tumble-down structures; then he made out a square and substantial-looking barn ten yards ahead.

Horse and master splashed through puddles toward it. Lighting blazed, quivered; then blackness fell again. The rain still poured down in heavy, large drops that pattered on the poncho and tapped nervously on the empty saddle of the horse.

Far up in the Prospector Hills thunder bellowed, pounding from rock-cliff to rock-cliff, then dribbling down the long slopes in lessening, irritable explosions.

Steele halted, staring over his shoulder.

He had thought he heard a noise foreign to the storm. He felt a slight crawling sensation at the back of his neck, as if someone was watching him intently.

"Pshaw!" With his elbows he hitched his cartridge belt under the poncho. "Guess it wasn't anything. But this whole place is kind o' spooky, at that."

Dropping Buster's reins, he stepped to the door of the square barn. His eyes squinted swiftly as his investigating hand found it three feet ajar.

Steele rubbed his jaw. Then he stepped over the threshold, and Buster, as if eager for shelter, followed of his own accord. The musty odor of rotted hay and moldy grain made the Ranger hesitate yet again and glance thoughtfully at the vague outlines of the doorway. Buster, as if he disliked the smell, backed out and stood somewhere in alley blackness, invisible.

It struck Steele as strange that the odor of decay was so strong in the barn if that door had been open several years.

Commencing to fumble for a match, he stepped forward, feeling out with his other hand. His fingers encountered something—and it moved.

Next instant a hard object jabbed Flash Steele's side. He felt a human being close, no more than fifteen inches away. Heard a low, crackling voice:

"Trailed me, eh? Damn you, I'll give you some medicine that'll teach—"

STEELE struck downward, at the same instant swinging sideways away from the unknown. He was gambling on the fact that the fellow could see him no better than he could distinguish the hold-up in this inky dark. And it was a shrewd gamble, for the roar of the Colt made a fiery splash two whole feet in front of him.

Steele rushed the man. His right fist grazed his cheek, his left struck paringly to the neck. Next instant another throbbing report of the six-gun seemed to make the empty barn reel. But the flaming powder showed Steele his antagonist backing, and he charged again, alternately raining blows and grabbing for the fellow's weapon.

They struck together, the gun pinned between their chests. Steele's foot inadvertently tripped the unknown, and snarling, he went down. His clutching hand jerked the Ranger atop him, and for an instant they were in clawing, gouging, threshing confusion on the rough flooring sparsely littered with old hay. But a knee-jab to the pit of his stomach flung Steele away, and before he could do more than claw down wet clothing in an effort to hold the fellow, his adversary scrambled panting to his feet.

Steele was up like a spring. He sensed movement for the door. "Halt! I'll shoot!"

He didn't, of course, have his gun out. It was rather a bothersome reach through the arm-slit of his poncho and he had had no time to make that reach. Grabbing for the Colt now, he saw that the threat was all he would need. The man vanished out of the doorway.

Following to the threshold, Steele stopped, Colt in hand, holding his breath. He heard splashing in the alley puddles, a grunt as the man unexpectedly collided with something. Then muffled curses as

the unknown rushed on. Listening intently, the Ranger heard a faint creak of saddle leather, then a rush of sucking hoofs.

They thinned away. The tough was gone.

Going out in the alley, Steele searched until he located his bronc standing beside a broken fence. He dragged the horse back toward the barn, but then decided to seek another, less odorous shelter for Buster. Going on twenty yards he found a smaller shed, the door of which was fixed by a hinge and eyelet with a wood peg locking it.

Entering, Steele again probed his corduroy coat pocket for a match. As he brought it out he realized for the first time that he was holding something damp and cold, something metallic, in that hand. He transferred the object to his other gripping his Colt, and striking his match, saw that he now stood in an empty woodshed. It would do for Buster.

He stared down at the thing he must have clawed off that unknown holdup's clothing during their tussle. It was a concho.

Steele cocked his head interestedly. This was not the familiar silver-plated type of decoration for a cowboy's chaps or sombrero or ankle spur-strap. About the size of a dollar, it was of copper. He could just make out a somewhat worn *fleur-de-lis* etched on it.

"It'll help me recognize that hombre if we meet again," he reflected grimly, turning it over. "He'd likely have more'n one of these on his outfit."

A slow grin started at the corners of his lips. "Wonder who he thought I was? Anyhow, he sure hasn't any use for that hombre. And he acted kind of respectful, forkin' his hoss and dustin' away so fast."

HIS match died. Taking off his sombrero, he whipped rain from its crown. Then he tucked the copper concho

behind its tooled leather strap encircling the crown. Two-thirds of the disc was exposed but Flash Steele thought it would ride there all right.

Still trying to invent some explanation of that abrupt clash in an alley barn of a ghost town, he unsaddled his bronc and made sure Buster stood in a dry place. There was no feed for him, but the horse would be all right. He took himself outdoors, stared up and down the alley, then went between two slouching buildings to the sidewalk of Midasville's main street.

He couldn't decide much of anything about that encounter. The fellow had seemed ornery about someone trailing him. He just didn't like being trailed, not a bit. But whoever had trailed him had not put in an appearance, and somehow Steele felt that unknown was mistaken about being followed.

"Well, he pulled out. And I've got Buster taken care of. It isn't likely, even if my friend should come back, that he's goin' to search every shed to find my bronc and steal him. Anyhow," he told himself, "it never pays to get riled up and anxious about what may or may not happen. I'll just keep in mind, when I hit Bearpaw, to look for a gent fancied up with copper conchos. Then I can ask a few questions about him and prob'ly hit on a good explanation for the whole ruckus."

He was moving along the broken board sidewalk. Peering at the bleak windows of store after store, he could not shake off a growing sense of loneliness that rose from the gloom of this deserted town. The wind moaned, driving rain into his face, pattering it on his poncho. Once or twice a rotten board gave way, almost pitching him off balance. Somewhere a door slammed, and slammed again. And suddenly he spun around as a distant mumble of voices seemed to reach him.

But it wasn't anything, of course.

Steele decided to locate a dry place for himself and get to sleep quickly. The

utter forlornness of Midasville was beginning to get under his skin. He half wished he hadn't stopped here. But of course it was several miles across the valley floor to the nearest ranch, without a doubt. And one place was as good—

An ejaculation burst out as he froze in his tracks.

Flash Steele stared across the street at a yellow blur of light through a large square window there. He blinked several times, scarcely believing what his eyes reported. But it actually was a light, a rather strong one. And now, vaguely against it, he made out lettering on the window, and knew the place had been a saloon.

His hand went instinctively to the bulge of the holstered six-gun on his thigh. Scowling, he stood considering this unbelievable phenomenon. A saloon lighted up in a ghost town—almost as if, of all the structures in this dead community, it still did a thriving business!

Swallowing, he moved slowly through a break in the hitchrail, and plowing through shallow puddles, crossed the street. Gaining the far sidewalk a few yards from a corner of the saloon, Steele finally convinced himself that he was not imagining things. The yellow lamplight fell feebly onto the walk in front of the place.

He could read now what the lettering said:

MINER'S TENSTRIKE

He searched its hitchrail, half expecting to find horses and burros tied there as they must have been lined up every evening during the boom days. But there weren't any now, of course. Midasville was a memory in the endless metal-hunt of the west.

Steele walked toward the doorway of the Miner's Tenstrike. He stopped a foot away from the window lest he be seen by anyone within, and in sheer astonishment saw two men seated at a table near the

front. A bottle stood between them, and as he watched, one lifted and took a long drink from it. His companion leaned and picked up a saddlebag, which he tipped to empty its contents.

STEELE'S fists clenched with suppressed excitement. He stifled an exclamation. It was money spilling out of that saddlebag—paper money in wads. Thousands and thousands of dollars!

He stood transfixed. This thing was difficult to get hold of.

The gray cobwebs streaking the dozen or more empty tables around those two men, the deserted crude bar of planks resting on the tops of fat barrels. The shadowy rear of the saloon—the utter ghostliness of it all.

Somehow the scene made his flesh crawl. It was unreal, like a distorted dream. Yet he was actually seeing two men at a table of the Miner's Tenstrike Saloon in deserted Midasville. They were bent forward now, absorbed in the counting by wads of that money. Now and again one or the other straightened, took up the bottle of whiskey, and drank. Now and again they glanced at each other, then continued their task.

The yellowback and greenback bills piled up. A fortune lay in plain sight on that table.

Rain spilled monotonously. It pattered on Flash Steele's poncho, drained off the V-twisted brim of his sombrero. He found himself moving closer to the saloon window, the better to watch that incredible scene.

The two men, he saw, were well dressed. One was tall, with a beak-like nose, wearing a celluloid collar that gleamed in the light of the two coal-oil lamps at the edge of their large table. He had the look of undoubted respectability—a small town banker or leading citizen. And his companion, short and lightly-built, was almost as well dressed. A diamond ring glittered on his finger as it

caught the light. They looked two gentlemen consummating a big deal.

"Kind of a wet evenin', friend!"

Starting at sound of that voice, Steele spun around, plunging a hand for his gun. But sight of a Colt muzzle only three feet away pointed grimly at his head, made him desist.

Swiftly he realized that his captor was not, as he first supposed, the fellow he had tussled with in the alley barn. He faced a tall, rather good looking man of thirty-odd, with a look about him of fitness that might stamp him a cattleman.

The savage expression of his vaguely-seen face ebbed and was gone. Relief poured over Steele as he saw the six-gun lower, saw a grin tug at the newcomer's lips. His eyes dwelt on the Special Ranger's sombrero, then met Steele's.

"Didn't see that concho at first. I'd sure have killed you. We can't take chances with fifty-five thousand dollars layin' on that table in there. Come too close already to havin' it grabbed. But I see now you must be Pete Zastrow's son, and you're wearin' the badge that proves it. Pete got us word he couldn't come but would send you. Let's go in. Damn this weather!" he rasped.

He passed in front of Steele and pulling the door open, motioned for him to enter. Thinking fast, the Ranger obeyed.

He realized that the copper concho thrust carelessly into the strap around his sombrero had saved him from being shot down. This man believed Steele to be Pete Zastrow's son, whom he was expecting. But who was Pete Zastrow?

The pair counting money had leaped to their feet snatching out Colts at the first sound of voices outside. As Steele entered their hostile eyes bored him, but when the tall, middle-aged man followed, they relaxed.

"Huh! You're late, Doc. Who's that, Zastrow's boy?"

"I'd never o' knowed him," the other declared. "'Course, I haven't seen you,"

he told Steele, "since Pete sent you down to your uncle's in Arizona to kind of reform you."

"Yes, he's Pete's boy. Just came home. Nick," he addressed Steele, "meet Paul B. Lentner and Jefferson Black. I'm Crawford—Doc Crawford. Not a real doctor,"



he smiled thinly. "I was a veterinary once, but hosses just wouldn't get well for me. So I changed businesses."

"Mining pays better, I shouldn't wonder," Black commented dryly.

"How is your father?" Lentner inquired. "Think he'll pull through?"

Steele hesitated. Was his "father" ill or wounded?

"It's pretty serious," he managed. "That's why I came home."

"Doctor Berry told me he might not get well, gentlemen," Crawford informed them gravely. "Kidney trouble, you know. Bad."

THERE was a short silence. "Well you're entitled to take your father's place, Nick. Sit down. Let's get to our decision. We can't take chances with this money; it's got to be moved right off. Why, the whole welfare of this valley's at stake!"

Removing sombrero and poncho, Steele coolly built a cigarette as he accepted a chair brought politely by Jefferson Black. He was aware that Doc Crawford was a cold, fishy-eyed type, debonaire but hard. Black was somewhat effusive, like a banker. Lentner he could not label at all.

He looked as if he could be relentless and cruel, yet had a veneer of affability.

Black had produced a new deck of cards, which he was shuffling now. Lentner was saying:

"We just counted it again. It's all there, fifty-five thousand. We've got to get it to a safe place. There's plenty folks would like to lay paws on all that cash. Why, it's a fortune!

"So," he went on, lighting a black cigar, "we've got to decide who'll take it to be away. I suggest we play one hand of draw poker, as we just about decided at our last meeting. That'll show which one of us takes the money. That suit you, Zastrow?"

Steele suppressed a gasp. He exhaled smoke with slow deliberation, striving to conceal the excitement he felt. Accepted as a member of their group by three wholly strange men, he was to be given one chance in four to become custodian of fifty-five thousand dollars.

His hunch told him to go along with them and await developments. Looking up, he found the three eying him patiently.

"Sure," Steele agreed casually. "One hand of poker for the cash suits me all right. Shall we get at it right away?"

CHAPTER II

COLT DRAW POKER

SILENCE fell. Smoking, the men watched Jefferson Black's short, fat fingers shuffle and reshuffle the clean, new cards. Each face wore a pleasant expression which Steele guessed was a mere mask of real emotions. The Miner's Tenstrike Saloon, with its cobwebby, lamp-shadowed background of empty tables and chairs coated with dust, the blank bar, the moths whirling around the two smoky oil lamps—all created a sense of unreality that was eerie and disturbing.

Trying to shake off the apprehension that gnawed inside him, Flash Steele

covertly studied his companions. Several times he formed, then changed, his opinion of them. There was no denying that the three looked respectable.

But *were* they?

Why would three respectable citizens, business men, perhaps, meet in this out-of-the-way, deserted town on such a night? If their need was for secrecy, why would not the home of one of them supply it? Or a hotel room in Bearpaw, twenty miles away? Why, on a rain-fogged night such as this, should they journey to a ghost town to decide who was to take charge of the fortune in cash?

He decided they were plotting some ambitious crime, or possibly concealing one already committed. Whatever it was, all three took for granted that Steele was thoroughly familiar with it. Nothing was explained to him about the purpose or origin of those twin piles of cash. Pete Zastrow must know, of course, and these three thought Zastrow had explained to his "son."

Suppose Nick Zastrow appeared suddenly and exposed Steele?

They must be crooks, he thought. And yet it was hard to think of Jefferson Black, Paul B. Lentner and Doc Crawford as rascals. Crawford, he gathered, was a mining man. He looked as if he might own properties of value. The others had an air of importance, too.

No, they could not be crooks. They carried firearms and evidently could use them, but that did not stamp them dishonest. Every man who made his way in pioneer country learned to handle firearms. He had to.

Steele could not puzzle it out. Accustomed to judging men on first meeting, he was baffled by these. Contrarily, he was inclined now to think them honest. There had been mention of the welfare of the valley, and that hinted plans for some ambitious project of improvement.

He tensed slightly as the cards were dealt. In silence each man picked up his

five, glanced at the other players to see their reactions. Steele found one jack, an eight, five, four, three.

"Cards, gentlemen?" Black inquired softly.

Crawford asked for three, Lentner for one. Steele requested two, trying for a straight. He drew a ten and queen.

"Showdown," Black said.

There was a moment of tense hesitation. Then each laid his cards down. Doc Crawford, with a flush in hearts, was high. Steele caught his eye and grimaced ruefully. He gestured toward the cash.

"Well, Doc," he observed, "you win."

"Yes," Lentner agreed. "But, Nick, you got the worst hand. Jeff and I each got a pair. You haven't anything. So you take the money."

He stared at them. Swiftly he realized that it was not the winner, but the *loser* who was to take the money. And the loser was Flash Steele, alias Nick Zastrow!

With an effort he concealed the thrill of excitement that darted through him. His hand shook slightly as he dropped his cigarette stub and stepped on it. The three men sat motionless, watching him.

The silence of the ghost town saloon seemed oppressive.

"You ain't backin' out, Nick?" Black's tone had a metallic edge to it.

"Backin' out?" He gave a short laugh and pushed his chair back. "Not a bit! By the way," he added carelessly, "do you want to go over the details of what I'm to do, exactly? My father was in such pain he didn't talk any too clear. I'd better make dead sure what's what."

There was a swift exchange of glances. Steele tensed, ready at the slightest movement to claw for his holstered forty-five, upset the table and lamps, and dash for the door.

BUT there was no movement. The three seemed to decide that his request was reasonable.

"First," Black suggested, picking up the

saddlebag from the floor, "you can stow this cash back. Better get started right away, for it's quite a trip. And a bad night to make it, too. You won't go very fast."

"Trail's sure to be slippery, and it's a dangerous one in rain. You got a pretty sure-footed hoss, Nick?" Crawford asked.

"Yes. He isn't shod and he's a regular mountain canary."

Rising, he took the saddlebag from Black and began stowing the cash in it, a wad of bills at a time. He started to count the money but abandoned that, deciding their statement of fifty-five thousand dollars must be exact.

"You keep to the trail for about twelve, thirteen miles," Crawford went on. "Try to find three oaks close together, one of 'em split by lightning and leaning between the others. Right there, you turn sharp south, and when you get over two low ridges, you'll see the place."

"'Tain't locked, is it, Doc?"

"What, the cellar? No. A lock would only start up curiosity in whoever saw it. Reckon that's all the directions you'll need, Nick. That about like your father told you?"

"Just about. As I say, he didn't talk very plain."

"Uh-huh." Lentner was studying him intently. He reached a hand to Steele's arm. "Now, listen here, Nick. I'm an older man'n you and I've seen times. I've seen heaps o' money before. Don't get mad when I warn you not to take serious any hunch you got to make a getaway with this fifty-five thousand. It wouldn't pay. Would it, boys?"

Crawford's hard gray eyes narrowed. "Not while I live, it wouldn't."

"It sure wouldn't," Black supported grimly. "We got our minds made up to put this thing over, Nick, and nobody is goin' to block us. Savvy? Nobody! And we need that cash to do it. If we figured to let anybody slicker us," he added meaningly, "we wouldn't have come all

the way out here on a night like this. We could've taken chances on meetin' a lot closer to Bearpaw."

"And I'd have liked it a hell of a lot better," Lentner complained, glancing around the empty, dust-coated saloon.

Steele nodded soberly. Putting the last of the green and yellow-back bills in the saddlebag, he closed it. His back to the front of the Miner's Tenstrike, he glanced reassuringly from face to face.

"Gentlemen, don't worry about me. I'll get where I'm going in jig time. And I'm startin' now. Good luck," he said, lifting the bag, "and I'll see you—"

He jumped at a gun-blast from the street doorway behind him. A second throbbing explosion rocked the Miner's Tenstrike, hurling ear-pressing echoes from flimsy wall to flimsy wall. And before the vibration died away a voice snarled:

"Reach, you lobos! That there's only a sample! I'll drill the first one that moves a hand!"

Startled, Steele's fingers itched to curl around the walnut butt of his holstered gun, snatch it out, and go for the owner of that voice as he pivoted. For the conviction swelled powerfully in him now that his three companions must be honest. They were being victimized. The act of the holdup seemed to prove it.

The taut silence seemed minutes long. The faces of the three men, all so placed that they could plainly see whoever stood in the saloon doorway, became sallow and drawn. It was Jefferson Black who burst out yelling:

"Damn you! No two-gun lobo's goin' to get away—"

His words were drowned in a third explosion of a six-gun. Black ducked, snarling, as the slug whizzed close to his head.

"You, with your back to me! Swing that saddlebag wide with your right hand. Throw it my way! And don't turn around as you do it!

"But hold on," the gunman added

swiftly. "You other three buzzards stand up first. And keep those paws of yours ear-high!"

Their faces changed from yellow to crimson with futile rage. Trembling in their fury but moving cautiously, Crawford, Lentner and Black did shove their chairs back on the dust-thick floor. Standing erect, they lifted their hands higher.

"All right now, mister. Throw me that saddlebag!"

Steele hesitated. But he knew a bullet would come plowing into his back if he disobeyed or tried to draw and whirl. So, lifting the bag, he flung it in an arc behind him and in the general direction of that voice.

It struck the floor and slid several feet. He heard a cat-like step, heard the thief secure the bag, then retreat. The door hinges squeaked rustily, and outside somewhere on the main street of Midasville a horse nickered mournfully.

There came a sudden final six-gun roar. One of the lamps snapped off the table and fell, crashing in a million bits on the floor. Then the front door of the Miner's Tenstrike Saloon slammed with force that jarred the building, and sound of running feet died away in the moan and patter of wind and rain.



A savage snarl burst from Doc Crawford. He whisked a short-barreled revolver from somewhere under his coat. "Get him!" he roared. "Mow down that yella skunk!"

"We got—to get him!" Black piped in fury. He had a forty-five in his fist as he too rushed for the door.

"Back way!" Lentner yelled, darting for the rear door. "He'll head for the alley! Think he can throw us off! Hell, he don't know our hosses are—"

Steele heard no more. He was abreast Crawford, and as he leaned and snatched the door wide the sucking sounds of hoofs in the main street gumbo became louder. A red flash cut the rain-drizzling night and a bullet kicked a splinter from the door against his shoulder. Crawford recoiled, but Steele plunged on outside in time to shoot twice at the vague form of the rider before it was swallowed in the haze and darkness.

"Fork your hoss!" Crawford panted. "We'll meet here!"

STEELE was already dashing across the street, regretting that he had put Buster in a shed so far away. Though of course he had certainly not expected to meet men in conference in this ghost town on a rainy fall night, nor dreamed of being handed fifty-five thousand dollars in cash when he drew the poorest of four poker hands.

It was only a minute before he was plunging into the darkness of the woodshed, and felt Buster's damp shoulder under his hand. He flung his saddle on the bronc's back, jerked the cinch tight, grabbed the reins loose from the knothole where they were tied, and dragged the animal outdoors. Then he was forking it, wheeling Buster, spurring him toward the main street of Midasville.

The remaining oil lamp still glowed forlornly inside the Miner's Tenstrike—and it would burn there until the fuel gave out. As Steele slowed to let Buster pick his way into the road a figure loomed on his left. Another behind it was Lentner. Black, the first man leaned.

"Come on! He'll head east for the range an' figure to loose us on the level! We *got* to get back that cash! I told you stupids they'd trail us and try to steal that money! I *told* you!" he berated fiercely.

Lentner snarled at him to shut up. "Did all we could, didn't we? How'd we know we'd get robbed twenty miles from home, sittin' in a ghost town saloon?"

Crawford shouted from farther down the street, and spurring their horses, they joined him. Without further parley the four urged their mounts to a fast pace, thudding gummily in the mud of Midasville's main street, then spattering through puddles of the twisting, rutty road that descended to the level of the valley floor between east and west arms of the Prospector Hills.

They rode as fast as they dared in the impenetrable dark. How Crawford followed the highway, Steele could not comprehend, for they went splashing around hairpin turns, taking sudden drops, fording a humming mountain creek that rose to his horse's shoulders. But on they went without hesitation, trusting to the judgment of shrewd-faced Doc Crawford. And they kept the road and made rapid time to the gently-rolling floor of the valley.

THEN a fork was reached. Steele, his eyes now accustomed to the dark, could just make out the three branches of it, one northeast, one straight, the other southeast. Crawford reined in, calling guardedly to the others to do likewise.

"I figure he'll take the left or the middle fork. We all know where he's from," he added grimly, "and he'll want to get back home fast as he can."

"Sure! Two've us'll take the middle. Let's start!" Black urged impatiently.

"No—wait, boys! S'pose he figures to fool us like that? I'll take the south," Lentner volunteered.

There was short debate. "Why not let Nick? It's toward his Buckle ranch. He knows that section better'n us account of it bein' his home," Crawford argued. "Come on, Lentner, you go with Jeff. I'll go north. Nick," he added, "you want to take that fork alone?"

"Sure."

"Keep an eye peeled. And if you get close enough," Black clipped off angrily, "burn that hombre down. Don't wait to talk. We can't let our scheme out to anybody else. Kill him!"

"How the devil'd he ever get wind—?"

"Never mind that now, Paul. Nick, you sink lead in his heart, savvy? I don't *know* who that hombre was—he wore a bandana maybe you couldn't see. But I got ideas," Crawford rasped. "And my main idea is that he's Bud McKay."

"You're crazy, Doc! Too tall. The feller—"

"Cut out the talk. Git! And Nick, you know where to find us if you grab that cash. And we'll let you know if we do. S'long!"

Urging his horse to a lope, Steele lost all sign of them in the dark as he started along an unfamiliar road on his incredible search for a man he had never laid eyes on.

He wished he had just glimpsed that lone holdup, but his back had been turned until the fellow bolted out of the Miner's Tenstrike. Evidently he was tall, and Steele had noticed by the different sounds of his guns that he had two forty-fives in his fists. His face had been concealed by a bandana, the other three agreed. Even they had not recognized him, familiar as they doubtless were with folk hereabout.

"Anyhow, I'm gettin' this thing sized up a little," he told himself, riding southeast in the rainy dark. "Lentner and Black and Doc Crawford seem to be on the level—though it's kind of funny they didn't say exactly what they got in mind. But I'll bet," he mused, jerking his sombrero lower and rearranging his poncho to cover his knees, "they're up to some mining scheme. They want to keep it quiet until they're ready to start work."

He nodded. "Must be, they all chipped in to finance it. Even Pete Zastrow, my 'father,' contributed. Maybe there's no bank in Bearpaw, or it's so flimsy they

don't trust it. So they decided to send the money away. And as there was no use for all four to make the trip, they had to pick somebody."

Peering ahead, he thought it over again. Nodded. He felt he had the story detailed just about right. He now felt sure of the honesty of those three, and also a little guilty that he had deceived them as to his identity. But there was no real harm done. And he had a right to investigate the suspicious circumstance of three men gathering in a ghost town with such a huge sum in cash in their possession.

True, certain factors still were puzzling.

But there had been a holdup for the fifty-five thousand dollars. Why would an honest man have worn a bandana? And it wasn't sensible that both the hold-up and the victims were crooks.

STEELE straightened in his saddle, his jaw set. That was the important consideration just now. The theft. It was his job as a lawman to get that money back for its rightful owners. He could then reveal who he really was and demand a full explanation.

Halting twice, he heard distant rumbling that would be cattle stirring restlessly in the rain. He could smell them, too, and smell the thick, luscious buffalo grass that made the valley excellent grazing land.

There were a number of good-sized cow outfits hereabouts, he had heard. Evidently Pete Zastrow operated one called the Buckle brand.

After several miles the road veered back toward the foot of the hills, circling through narrow rock-walled chasms, dipping into a shallow gorge. Later, still holding generally southeast, it led along the edge of range Steel could feel and identify by the bronc's interesting sniffing. On his right rose a shoulder of scattered rock and debris from a foothill landslide.

He reined in at sound of clacking horns. Steele decided to seek out a night

rider with that stock to make certain he still was heading southeast. After a moment he heard a horse nearing, and spurred Buster to meet the man.

"Hey, cowboy!" he called. "Can you give me some directions?"

The horse must have halted. Then an answer came. "Reckon so. Hold still. Think I see you, mister."

He waited, and slowly a vague form loomed out of the rain. Steele urged his mount nearer.

"Just wondered if I've kept on the road. Didn't miss a fork, did I?"

Suspicion came to him of rife danger. He thrust a hand inside his poncho, closed it over the butt of his six-gun. He was just drawing it slowly when another form suddenly loomed up on his right.

"No, you didn't miss a fork. You came right, stranger," the first individual drawled with an edge of sarcasm to his tone.

The other man laughed harshly. "That's right. And before you get killed, hang your paws in the air. Understand? Quick! You're covered!"

Despite his previous apprehension, it was startlingly sudden. Steele could not withdraw his hand without spilling the Colt, and the movement he made under his poncho was not clear to the two men. One heeled his mount back and fired, the flash of his weapon slanting a foot in front of Buster's nose.

The bronc jerked frightenedly on hind legs, pawing the air. Just then Steele got his weapon out. He was squeezing the trigger when another explosion came on his right.

Pain blazed through his head. The blow of the slug skimming flesh behind his ear knocked him reeling as Buster came down on all fours and snorting furiously, leaped ahead.

Steele pitched out of the saddle. He struck soft, sodden ground on his shoulder and the left side of his head struck a small rock.

That was all he knew as he went limply unconscious.

CHAPTER III

WHOSE CASH?

HOURS later, it seemed, he heard an anxious feminine voice and knew someone was striving to lift him. But whoever it was couldn't manage it. Yet he thought he got on a horse's back somehow and rode miles more in the rain that at last slowly was lessening. He seemed to have had a companion on that trip—but who, and where that person went was lost in complete blankness.

Now Flash Steele lay puzzling about that yellow with silver flowers on it that entirely surrounded him. Slowly he realized that it was wallpaper. That he lay in bed, a big, old-fashioned four-poster that must have been brought at considerable expense from the East. The thought came to him that he had wanted to sleep last night in a real bed, and he had.

It was a room in a ranchhouse; he could hear stock outside in the sunny morning.

Half an hour passed. Then he heard steps nearing, and watched the bedroom door open gently and quietly. A tall yellow-haired girl peered in, surprised when her very blue eyes found him staring at her. She smiled a little, then swung the door wide and entered.

"Hello!" she said, and put buoyancy and freshness into that single word. "Hungry? I'll bring your breakfast. Then you're going back to sleep."

"Sleep? I've had plenty. The breakfast idea sounds good, but I'll be gettin' up after that, thanks. Er—what hotel is this?"

"It's the Diamond G. Name of Garrison here," she went on cheerfully. "I'm Mona. You're hurt, Mister—er—"

"Smith," he suggested, gingerly touching the sore, thickly bandaged place on the back of his head.

"Oh, yes. It's always Smith, Brown, or Jones, isn't it?" Mona Garrison stood clutching a post at the foot of the bed, looking at him. "Yes, of course. Strange men found dazed from gunfire give you a choice of those names. So original, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," she reflected, "you're a dangerous character and I ought to have buried you instead of trying to hoist you on your horse and slipping and going headlong in the mud myself, and various other little things. You Smiths, Browns and Joneses always choose the worst weather to be found in, thus making the most trouble and bother. The very most!"

He grinned, silent a moment. "Reckon I must have been a lot of trouble, and I'm sorry. Hope I'll be able to pay back what you've done for me. I wasn't quite fit for buryin', but I might have got to be if you hadn't come along.

"How did it happen," he went on, "that a young girl was takin' a ride that time of night, and on such a night?"

He thought a little of the color drained out of her cheeks. She went to the window and looked out.

"You heard the story of the horse that collided with one tree after another? He wasn't blind like folks thought. It was just cussedness made him do it; he didn't give a hang. The Garrison family," she explained lightly, "is like that. What's weather if you want to ride?"

MONA GARRISON was pretty in her blue-checked gingham dress, standing there with the sun flowing through the tall window on her face and shoulders. She was about twenty, Steele thought, and he liked the freshness and confidence of her. And yes, she certainly was pretty, with her ripe wheat-colored hair combed back to a knot, with her gently tanned skin and rosy cheeks and a few freckles on her nose.

Steele sensed that under her careless cheeriness, Mona was being cautious in

what she said. She wondered about him, of course. He had an impulse to give his real name; but then something decided him to postpone that.

"I'll get you something to eat. Won't take long." Turning, she went out of the room and closed the door.



Presently Mona Garrison returned with a heavily-laden tray. Fully dressed and smiling, Steele opened the door wide for her. Surprise almost made her drop the tray. She searched his face; then her eyes fell to the cartridge belt he held in his hand.

"Oh!"

That was all she said as she passed him to put the tray on a walnut table. He followed, bringing chairs as she arranged a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, coffee, and home-made bread and jam.

"Miss Garrison—"

"Just Mona, please."

"All right, Mona. Thanks for everything. And don't worry about me. I mean, I'm not, I hope, as bad off as I looked when you found me. I'm darn glad you found me, and I want you to know I'm grateful—"

"Forget it, Mr. Brown. I couldn't have you littering up our land."

They looked at each other and had to smile. It wasn't bad; still you were knocked out. Why not be careful?"

"Thanks, but I feel tiptop. I was stunned, that's all. The slug creased me and I fell off Buster. You must have come along pretty soon, because I dimly remember it. Is your father home?" he inquired.

"No. He'll be back toward night. He's selling some stock." Rising, she went to the window. "I wish Jack would come. He's probably wondering what became of you. It won't occur to him you're here."

Buttering his bread, Steele glanced at her slantwise. "Jack. Yes. Wonder what became of him."

"Oh, he got away all right. I didn't see him, though that's what I rode out to do. I was worried. But he got away, I'm sure. I suppose he was looking for you when I arrived, after those men caught up with you. I heard the shooting." She turned. "He did get away, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure he did."

Steele's puzzlement deepened. What was *this* all about?

Mona seemed to be talking of the meeting he had had with those two men who shot him. But Mona Garrison did not appear to realize that Steele had been the victim of the surprise, and perhaps had been shot by someone by the name of Jack. She believed Steele to have been Jack's companion.

He wanted urgently to ask her to throw some light on that three-man gathering he had joined in Midasville, but something held him back, made him conclude to postpone any mention of it. There was, however, the matter of the money. How could he inquire about that?

"Bearpaw isn't far, is it? I was heading there, Mona."

"Why no, only about eight miles. You mean after you left Jack Beacham you were going there? But wasn't he, too?"

"Well—er, I believe he changed his mind."

HE gazed out the window at a juniper pole corral, inside which half a dozen saddle horses were milling lazily. Buster was there, drinking at the trough in the center. Beyond the corral Steele saw a corner of a gray barn, and far in the background, the blue-green timbered beginnings of the Prospector Hills. That

was, he thought, the west branch of the Hills he had crossed yesterday.

"Any mining around here?" he asked casually.

Mona Garrison glanced at him in frank surprise. "Why! I thought you— But you mean, is there any going on now; isn't that it? Not much, no. There was a boom years ago over around Midasville. There are diggings all over the hills, both arms, but not many being worked because they don't pay. But I guess you really know more about it than I do," she laughed, "being a mining man yourself."

Then she inquired, "Did you come right out from Denver?"

"No. I had business over west quite a piece." He realized that he had learned something in that exchange, and also had almost exposed himself.

"Well, Mona," he said, pushing his chair back, "I'm expecting rather an important letter in Bearpaw, so I think I'd better start for there. And I'm plenty fit to take myself off your hands. Reckon I'll saddle up Buster and mosey on to town. Don't want—"

A call outside made him break off. Their eyes met. A happy smile wreathed Mona Garrison's face, and springing from the arm of the chair where she had been sitting, she ran to the window.

"Jack! Hel-lo!" she cried. "Come in, Jack! I've got a surprise!"

"So've I!" Steele heard from outdoors. "Big news, Mona. Great news, honey!"

Straightening, she looked at Steele, and he realized that the arrival of the rider had made her radiant. The Special Ranger rose and forcing a smile, lightly touched her arm.

"He probably wonders what in the world became of me. Maybe thinks I got killed. You talk to Jack awhile, let him pour out his news. A man likes bein' listened to," he explained. "When the right minute comes, I'll walk out. How's that?"

She started to nod. Then just a tinge

of suspicion came into her blue eyes. Mona hesitated.

"This is so terribly risky, I ought to be certain you—well, I mean— Oh rats! You're really in the scheme, aren't you? And helped Jack steal the money? And you're going to get rich like the rest of us?"

Reluctance tugged at Steele's heart. He hated deceiving this earnest, candid girl. Yet she was leading straight to the matter he wanted to understand, the theft he had to solve.

"Sure!" he told her. He looked at the bedroom door. "There he comes, Mona!"

She hurried out of the room, pausing as she drew the door shut, to smile at him and hold a slender forefinger to her lips in warning.

Then she was gone.

STEELE strode to his cartridge belt hung on a mirror support of the washstand. His six-gun, somewhat smeared with dried mud, was in its holster, and as he completed buckling the belt on, he drew and picked off the gray caking. He tiptoed to the door, listening.

Evidently Mona Garrison was in Jack's arms. They came nearer, as if to the center of the living room of the one-story ranchhouse.

"—got the money, Mona. Every dollar of it! Right here in this saddlebag. And you know what that means to us, honey! Fifty-five thousand dollars. Phew!" the newcomer exclaimed. "But I worked to get it, I'll tell you! Even to holin' up in the barn on the old Krueger place. You see, my hoss went lame. Then I thought, well, if I come here, that's just where they might think to look for me. 'Cause I suppose I was recognized. They—"

"Were you hurt, Jack? In the shooting?"

"Shooting?" he questioned. "Why no. There wasn't any, Mona, not to speak of. What do you mean?"

"Oh, perhaps I haven't got it right.

You sit down here, Jack, and tell me just what happened. I'm dying to know!"

Steele heard them move to chairs. He heard the feet of one scrape on bare flooring.

"Honey, gettin' that cash is goin' to mean everything to us. It's all right there in that saddlebag—fifty-five thousand. Ever see that much, Mona? I'll show you in a minute. But now about what happened," he checked himself with a laugh.

"First, you know about me getting that concho out of Pete Zastrow's room. By the way," he added, "Pete died during the night.

"Well, I trailed Doc Crawford clear to Midasville. I was puttin' my hoss in a barn on the alley when someone came in real sudden. We had quite a tussle, but I got away. But he clawed the concho off'n me, so that changed my plans and I couldn't walk right in the saloon like I was part of the meetin'. But it worked out good anyhow, because you know who I fought with in the shed? Nick Zastrow! And he sat in with the—"

"Nick—then he's home again! Oh, Jack, you were lucky he didn't kill you. He's a dead shot, and so fast drawing that—"

"You bet I was lucky, darn lucky. Well, it was Nick. Him bein' back is goin' to mean trouble for your father, Mona. They just don't get along and never did. And Nick Zastrow always swore to have this place. You'll have to tell Dad to keep a sharp lookout."

"I—I know. I'm afraid for him already. They'll get to quarrelling over that creek and there'll be a shooting. Nick may kill Dad. He's killed others, and he'll kill my father!"

"Pshaw, let's not bury Dad 'fore he even finds out Nick's come back!" he reproached cheerfully. "But now to go on; I see 'em sittin' around a table in a saloon. The money was right there, in this same saddlebag. I held 'em up, fired a couple of shots to prove I meant business, and

skipped. So, honey, we're just fifty-five thousand dollars ahead!"

"Oh, Jack, you hug like a regular bear! Though it is wonderful, isn't it? And now look and listen, for I've got a surprise."

"You have, Mona? What is it?"

"Well," she teased, "you and your mining expert from Denver got separated last night, didn't you? Out near that petrified pine? And aren't you worried what became of him?"

"Hold on! You mean Lorenzon, the fellow I wired at Denver?"

"Of course! Though he told me his name is Brown, Smith, or Jones. Haven't you worried since you got separated last—"

"But, Mona! Lorenzon's office wired back that he's gone east. He certainly hasn't been *here*. I haven't seen him since— Say!" he exclaimed, and Steele heard him get quickly to his feet, "what is this, a—"

"Stand hitched, Beacham!"

The man started. Sight of the leveled forty-five in Steele's fist as he stood on the bedroom threshold made him fling a bitterly accusing look at Mona. He glared at his captor, seemed to debate swiftly whether to grab for his gun.

"It'd be dead easy to stop you," the Ranger pointed out sharply.

Beacham wilted. His lean face took on a look of helpless rage. Advancing slowly, Steele reached out his left hand and fingered the saddlebag lying on the table, obviously still stuffed with paper money.

MONA sprang from the sofa where she had been sitting. Her eyes blazed. She was very pale and her lips quivered as she tried to express her scorn.

"You lied! I—I hate and despise you! You deliberately deceived me! After I helped you, worked over you! You made me think—"

"I'm sorry about that. Honest I am." Steele felt himself reddening under his

tan. "But I didn't know what you were talking about, Mona. I had to wait to make sure. And I'm sorry you're in this thing, because it looks pretty serious. Just a matter of stealing a fortune," he reminded grimly.

"Stealing? Who the devil are you, hombre?"

"Yes, stealing. You held up four men in that Midasville saloon, didn't you? You certainly don't own that fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"No-no. It isn't mine." He licked his lips. "But it doesn't belong to you, either! You're just some damned gunman, point-in' that hogleg for pay! And you won't—"

"Hold on, Beacham. Look," he notified, "I don't savvy this at all. What is that money for? Whose is it? Talk fast, or I'll have to—"

Mona Garrison rushed at him. Steele sidestepped cat-like, but her hand knocked his weapon down and all but struck it from his grasp. That gave Beacham his chance and he drew.

But he was no experienced gunman, and his Colt seemed to snag. Before he got it out Steele had rounded the table, snatching the saddlebag as he went. Then Beacham fired, the bullet whizzing close past Steele's cheek. He in turn fired, and Beacham spun around with the blow of a bullet through his gray flannel shirtsleeve. He went reeling against the end of the stone fireplace, his gun clattering on the floor.

Steele made for the door. He saw Mona just snatching up a six-gun from the table drawer, saw her aiming it. She was fiercely intent on shooting him, at the same time forgetful of her own danger. He could have picked her off—could have done it easily. Perhaps he would have so shot a man.

But as it was Steele ducked and rushed out the door. Mona's gun roared, the kick of it bringing a gasp close after the report as she swayed back. Splinters flew

from the door frame, and one cut the Ranger's cheek slightly. Then he was outside, dashing for Jack Beacham's tan horse ground-reined near the end of the porch.



He was just leaping the low rail when he glimpsed a man straightening, gun in hand, on the ground below. Another was behind him. Off beside the gray barn a third individual sat his saddle, holding the reins of his partners' mounts. As Steele struck the ground the pair close beside the house rose, swinging their guns on him. His forefinger closed over his trigger.

"Nick!" Doc Crawford ejaculated.

"Cut the wind! We'll hold him back!"

At his elbow Jeff Black stared wide-eyed. Turning, he fired through a side window of the house. Crawford followed suit, then shot again.

"Don't kill anybody!" Steele cried.

He ran to Beacham's tan horse, forked it, and spurred toward Lentner waiting with the two other animals just as Black and Crawford came on the run.

"Good for you, Nick!" Lentner cried. "You got it back, eh?"

They were all mounted, all spurring away from the Diamond G outfit. From the end of the front porch came a throaty crash of a carbine, and dust spouted five yards on Steele's left. Then a six-gun snarled, and he knew Mona Garrison was shooting. Jack Beacham's carbine cracked again, but leaning low and kicking their

mounts, the fleeing riders already were almost out of range.

Lentner maneuvered his horse beside Steele's. "Good boy!" he applauded again. "You got it all in that bag, ain't you, Nick?"

"Sure he has. Heard 'em mention the money's all there. Say, Nick," Crawford exulted above the drumming of hoofs, "you sure pulled the wool over their eyes! Haw-haw! You're goin' to come in handy, yes sir!"

CHAPTER IV

RECEPTION AT THE XL

STEELE said nothing as he turned to gaze back. But Mona and Beacham were not in view, having gone, no doubt, to saddle horses. And as he swung front again, glancing at his triumphant companions, he experienced a heavy sensation in his chest that was disquieting.

Somehow he felt as if he had just done a wrong. Yet why should he feel that way? Jack Beacham had admitted the money was not his. And Mona—

He scowled. He hated to think that Mona Garrison would take part in any sort of crookedness. A moment ago he had believed her to be an accomplice in stealing the saddlebag full of cash. But now— Somehow, he wasn't sure of it.

What *was* this all about?

Watching Lentner closely, then Crawford and Black, he became aware of steadily rising doubt. After all, he had no proof that the money in this bag he held was theirs. He had thought they planned some sort of mining development, and that for some reason had preferred not to leave the cash for it in Bearpaw.

"But the way they came to get it back was kind of queer," Steele mused. "Most folks would have brought the sheriff. And fellows like these three, lookin' sort of prosperous, usually are the kind to turn

over a gun job to the law quicker'n anybody else."

He kept studying the men closely as they rode east and forty-five minutes later drew near a group of buildings that were headquarters of a ranch. The outfit was Lentner's, Steele guessed from the talk. He had noted an XL brand on steers they passed.

He asked no questions but noticed his companions still smiling broadly as if vastly pleased at the success of their morning foray. Nor was he supplied with any information until the quartet drew rein in front of the house. All dismounted.

"Just leave the hosses." Paul Lentner glanced at the saddlebag Steele had. "Say, Nick, you're all right! Sharper'n old Pete ever was, I shouldn't wonder. While we were talkin' about how to get that cash back, there you were gettin' it!"

The others grinned. "And we can use it," Doc Crawford declared heartily. "We can sure use that to develop our shaft. There's got to be a lot of shoring up to bore under a whole town. Miles of it, almost. And a lot more expense before we get producing."

"Bore under a whole town?" Steele repeated, turning to loosen his saddle cinch.

"Sure, Nick. Didn't your father tell you?"

"The old man was pretty sick." He took off his sombrero and gazed at the copper concho still showing from its band. "He just managed to get out that there was a big money-makin' scheme he had an interest in, and that I should wear this to Midasville. That's about all I know," he told his companions innocently.

They exchanged amused looks, and he knew that none of the three guessed the speeding of his pulse or the tension suddenly roused in him. For it seemed they were about to reveal what he yearned to know. If he could just keep them chatting while they were in their mood of gloating over the recapture of the money.

"Why," Lentner said, "don't you know

what that money was meant for, Nick?"

"Oh, sure. Some kind of fund to promote a mine scheme. But Pete wasn't very clear," he explained.

They chuckled. "Pshaw, that bag holds the cash Bearpaw folks collected to buy out the Kitty Mine! You know, there at the end of the street? And everybody thinks Doc Crawford owns it all alone!" Jefferson Black smiled.

Hitching his trousers, Lentner adopted a fatherly pose. "Why, Nick, we've got the simplest and surest scheme you ever heard of! You know about Doc here ownin' the old Kitty Mine? He must have been workin' about the time you left, years back. But the dam' thing petered out. Doc never really made a dollar out of the Kitty. Did you, Doc?"

"Only off you boys," Crawford grinned.

The other two managed a half-sheepish laugh. "Yeah, you roped us in, all right! Doc decides there's no more pay ore there, so he salts the shaft. Then he comes to Black, Pete Zastrow, and me, real confidential. Claims he just made a new, rich strike, but needs capital to get it out. He sells us a quarter interest each. First we knew, Doc skipped town with the new capital!"

"I had urgent business in Utah," Crawford explained.

BLACK wagged a forefinger at him admonishingly. "Yes, and I'd have murdered you if you hadn't! I'm not a violent man—unless aroused. But I'd have murdered you sure." He turned to Steele. "There we sat holding the bag. Owned three-fourths of a no-good mine. No good, that is, for a couple of years till our friend Jack Beacham recently discovered there's millions in gold spread under the whole town!"

"Yes, sir, Nick. And we can bore to every dollar's worth of it right from the Kitty shaft!"

"But we haven't let on that we three own the Kitty along with Doc. Now are

you beginnin' to see the light?" Lentner beamed.

"I guess," he went on, "your pa didn't tell you the half of it, Nick. Why, there's millions waitin' for us! And to cripple the townfolks," he added, stooping and taking the saddlebag out of Steele's hand, "we sort of borrowed this here fifty-five thousand they raised to buy the Kitty shaft from Crawford. So now how can Beacham and his pals buy? The option Doc gave 'em expires tomorrow. Tomorrow at noon."

"We've got to watch out for one thing, though," Black reminded seriously. "Suppose they raise another fund? Some of the big ranchers around here could go together and have it in a few hours. They haven't marketed their beef yet, and they could trail it to Centerline to the railroad in a hurry. Or by mortgages. 'Most every big cattleman owns a lot or two in Bearpaw he figured to retire and build a house on. So they're all stockholders in the new Bearpaw Mining Company. And cowmen sure don't like to lose out on anything. They'll plunge. And if they *do* raise another fund—since we, er, appropriated this one—they could still buy Crawford out. Doc made a written offer to sell at a certain price."

"Pshaw," Lentner scoffed, "they got to raise the coin first. Then they got to find you. Eh, Doc?"

When the responding laugh ended, Lentner waved them toward the ranchhouse. He came beside Steele and put an arm around his shoulders as if they were boon companions.

"You savvy it all now, Nick? Jack Beacham accidentally discovered one of the biggest strikes the Rockies ever saw, right under Bearpaw. He was helpin' his uncle put a cellar under his feed store. That's how it happened.

"Well, Beacham made every man, woman, and child in town swear not to whisper a word of it. Don't want prospectors pourin' in, see? He organized a

company with every taxpayer holdin' stock. He got up a fund, the fifty-five thousand right here in this bag. Black, as president of the bank, held it. Finally Beacham located Crawford and offered a thousand for the old Kitty claim. Doc wrote back he'll sell any time for forty thousand. 'Course, he never dreamt what was in the wind! Then he heard from Black on the quiet, and Doc rushed here pronto.

"Now look, Nick, I ask you; a whole mountain of gold wouldn't be good for those folks in Bearpaw anyhow. Would it? Make for drunkenness and gambling. Make 'em lazy, I say."

"I've seen money put many a young man on the road to hell," Jefferson Black argued seriously. "And I'm opposed to making poor folks suddenly rich. They go crazy. They don't know how to act. My friends," he assured pompously, "I'm fond of Bearpaw and I have no desire to see it ruined. Remember money is the root of all evil!"

"So we aren't going to risk landing the whole town in perdition," Doc Crawford drawled. "We'll just take care of their gold for 'em. Er—from my shaft. We'll have the town under our thumb, and later, maybe, we'll buy in their two-bit mining company. But if we don't, they'll be too weak anyhow to stop us draining off their ore through a shaft in the Kitty."

THEY had slowed, then stopped at the edge of the ranchhouse porch. Lentner urged them onto it, going himself to the door. "Nick, you never saw my place, did you? I'm buildin' up one of the finest cow outfits around here," he declared proudly. "Why, when I get that gold behind me, I'll build a cattle empire!"

"You made a good start," Crawford jibed, "with a long rope and your boys' hosses hoof-padded for use on dark nights!"

Lentner seemed not to mind the insult but rather to delight in it. He guffawed,

whacking Steele on the back. "Lead the way in, Nick. Don't believe more'n half what you hear. 'Cept about the millions we'll make. Soon as Doc's option runs out, the Bearpaw Mining Company will be high, dry, and bankrupt. They can't raise another forty, fifty thousand out of those town folks, let alone cattlemen and such that may own lots in town. So we can start up any time, and who'll prove the yellow stuff we produce comes from outside our claim?"

Crossing the threshold, Steele nodded, making no attempt to disguise the utter amazement he felt. He comprehended now, and the thing was big; these men's eyes gleamed and they rubbed their hands greedily at every mention of it.

Yes, he understood now. These rascals must have stolen that fifty-five thousand dollars from its original depository. Perhaps they had rifled the very bank Jefferson Black headed as president. Who would suspect him?



But Jack Beacham seemed to have suspected him. He had no proof, likely, but he must have had a hunch. That was surely why Beacham had trailed the men to their Midasville meeting and held them up.

Reviewing it all hurriedly made the blood whip faster in his veins. The thing almost whisked his breath away. The citizens of Bearpaw would be cheated of their due if these three got their way. And while they possessed the saddlebag stuffed with cash, they likely would have their way.

Steele could imagine how well off the

average Bearpaw lot owner must be. Usually folk in such small Western towns were poor. With their fund stolen, many of them doubtless would be deprived of all their savings. It was robbery—savage robbery—of poor people.

And he had taken part in defrauding them. That was what stung. He was guilty of crippling Jack Beacham's side. He, a Special Ranger, representing the Governor of the state, had stolen the money from Beacham and let these rascals regain it!

He thought all this swiftly as he held the door for the others to enter the darkly shaded ranchhouse living room. Steele was puzzling anxiously how he might get back that precious saddlebag. He hadn't dared to refuse when Lentner reached for it. Doc Crawford's cold, fishy eyes had been playing on him.

But now he knew all he needed to know. And it rocked him, seemed to weight his shoulders with the awful responsibility thrust on them.

He had to help Jack Beacham conclude Crawford's option. That was all that could save Bearpaw from exploitation. It was one of the most important tasks assigned Flash Steele in the two years since Big Jim Maridale had personally sworn him in as a Special State Ranger.

"Say, Nick," Jefferson Black was saying as he stepped up on the threshold, "over at Garrisons', why did you holler out not to kill Beacham? Struck me kind of funny, coming from you."

He thought fast, lips pursed, eyes evading Black's. Then he smiled and shrugged carelessly.

"Oh, I just don't believe in needless bloodshed is all. I don't figure it does any good to—"

Lentner's startled gasp made him break off. The eyes of all four men fixed on the thin, florid face of a hatless individual who jerked suddenly to full height behind the big table in the living room. His hair was tow-colored, the exact shade of Flash

Steele's. Menace glittered in his piercing slate-gray eyes, and backing that menace were two bluish Colts in his fists, cocked, with forefingers curled over their triggers.

Jefferson Black made a gurgling sound in his throat. Lentner's breath whistled through his teeth as he stared goggle-eyed. Steele, sizing up the stranger intently, thought he had seen him before, somewhere. But he could not supply a name for him. And he felt chill foreboding at the savage look of him and the hair-spring threat of a bullet in his chest.

"Elevate, you buzzards! I said *elevate!*"

The voice was husky, yet the order seemed to crackle in their ears. There followed a profound hush—and obedience. Four pairs of hands rose in the air. The saddlebag Lentner held dropped to the floor with a thud.

"Wh-what is this? What you doin' here? Who are y-you!" he burst out furiously.

The cold eyes did not blink. The man was narrow-shouldered, stringy of build, marked with that indefinable brand of a thorough-going rascal. He was an adroit gunman, Steele guessed by the way he held his weapons, the stance he had, and his two low-slung holsters, the tops of which were just visible across the table. He was tough and he was enraged.

Those two things spelled rife danger for the slightest wrong move.

"That's the money, huh? That bag?"

"Wh-why?" Black stuttered. "Say, who are you?"

"I'm the hombre you been aimin' to cheat. D'you mangy buzzards think you could cut *me* out? Just 'cause my old man was dyin' last night and gettin' buried today? 'D that make you think I wasn't goin' to watch out for my rights? He's due a cut—told me so when he was dyin'. I inherit what he owns. Savvy that?"

The captives exchanged uneasy scowls.

Steele felt a cold sensation crawl up his spine; he had the feeling of a trap closing in on him, slowly, inexorably.

"What cut do you think you'll get?" Doc Crawford snapped angrily. "Cut in what?"

The gunman's upper lip curled. "Still pretend you don't know, eh? What cut do you think but the cut that's due Pete Zastrow? One of you buzzards stole a copper concho out o' Pete's bedroom, and—hell, I tell you I'm Nick Zastrow!"

CHAPTER V

DEATH OF A MARSHAL

FLASH STEELE felt his heart skip beats, then pound harder and faster than before. But he did not shift weight or move his hands from the level of his temples. It wasn't safe yet to budge. There was plain murder threat blazing in the eyes of the man under whose name he had been masquerading.

The gulf of silence seemed endless. Turning his head slightly, Steele read sheer disbelief in Paul Lentner's round dark eyes. He heard a guttural snort from Doc Crawford a little behind him. Flash Steele looked back at the two-gun stranger, gauging his chances.

"Z-Zastrow!" Black shrieked suddenly. "Why, this tall fellow right here is—"

"Goshamighty!" Lentner exploded. "He is Nick Zastrow, boys! This dirty skunk that's been pretendin'—"

A six-gun sounded. Steele had chosen the instant Zastrow's attention was diverted by the excitement of the others. He fired from the hip, his shot coinciding perfectly with the livid gun-crash across the living room table.

The real Zastrow fired his other weapon, and Doc Crawford, already staggering from the newcomer's first bullet cutting his arm, was magically minus his hat.

Steele leaned, trying to snatch up the saddlebag. But he missed. He grabbed Paul Lentner's thick shoulders and threw

the rancher as hard as he could at the table. Lentner toppled over it face-down, narrowly escaping death as those twin gun muzzles belched again with sound that rocked the house. The force of his collision shoved the heavy table against Zastrow's stomach, and the fellow staggered against the wall, cursing fiercely.

Jefferson Black alone of them still was untouched. But if he had been slow to comprehend Steele's masquerade, he was not slow to move when movement was in order. With speed amazing in a small town banker he swished back the skirt of his coat and drew. Drew in an oily, blurred motion. And his hate-filled eyes were on the Ranger as his Colt cleared his hip.

Before he could shoot Steele spun half around, pulled the trigger twice. But he was wild, and the second bullet only left a whitish streak along Black's jawbone. It staggered the banker, and his shot splattered plaster from the ceiling.

The room quivered with vibration from gun reports, fogged with mushrooming gray smoke. That fog was what saved Steele's life, blurring and hiding him for an instant.

He plunged toward the nearest side window. A slug screamed overhead, cut through the low-pulled shade and the window pane behind it. Another gouged into the wood frame. Behind him someone yelled; a form struck the floor heavily; another wild flying slug smashed a mantel-shelf mirror to bits.

STEELE knew he dared not attempt to reach the front door. This window would have to serve, and serve immediately, for the real Zastrow was lurching erect cursing as he brought up his guns.

The Ranger launched himself from the floor. Though he ducked, the impact of the glass on his head was like the sharp blow of a club. But he pelted through, his knees just grazing the sill. Burst through, dropped several feet, struck hard, loamy

earth on his shoulder and slid more than a yard with air gushing out of his mouth.

A moment he lay battling for breath. He had just strength to snatch up his Colt, and half-turning, fire once at the window. A snarl broke off as Jefferson Black leaped out of harm's way.

Then Steele was on his feet. As he dashed unsteadily toward the four horses ground-reined out in the yard, another and yet another bullet whizzed past him. But the shooting from indoors was wild. He had a chance to get away provided—

Bootfalls thumping on the front porch made his heart leap. He slowed, turning, and saw Doc Crawford. Doc's short-barreled revolver was level, and it smoked. Something stung the Ranger's thigh.

The light blow of the bullet only jarred him. But it brought vivid realization that he dared not continue toward the four horses. Doc Crawford would not miss twice.

Steele hesitated a split-second. The vagrant thought had come to him as he dove out the window — where was the real Nick Zastrow's horse? Turning, he gambled that luck would deal another good card, and took to his heels for the rear of Paul Lentner's ranchhouse.

He got there, momentarily out of range of those vengeful guns behind—came to a breathless halt.

There was no horse!

Steele rushed on. He made now for a large unpainted barn sixty feet away. There should be an unsaddled animal or two—

Relief swelled in him at sight of a head in the open doorway. It had a bridle on it. He knew that was Zastrow's horse and that his luck still held.

There was shouting, cursing, shooting behind him. He dashed up the parapet of the barn, grabbed the dangling reins of the sleek, white-spotted tan pony. It reared frightenedly and tried to jerk out of his reach. But he held the reins and

shortening them, gave a sudden vault that landed him in the saddle.

A form darkened the barn doorway. "Stop, you skunk—"

A gun-blast drowned the oath. Steele was blinded as the bullet clipped the rear brim of his sombrero and knocked the hat down over his eyes. But when he had jerked it high again he was in a yard, and the startled pony was racing for a gate, only the lowest juniper bar of which was in place.

They leaped it as Crawford shot again. But the speeding target was almost an impossible one, and man and horse flashed away rangeward. Leaning low, Steele spurred the pony, whipped him with rein-ends.

There was a last vagrant bullet whistling overhead, then silence from the XL ranchhouse. But Steele knew the silence portended vengeful pursuit, and he kept the pony at full speed as he twisted in the saddle to stare back the way he had come.

He was a good half-mile away when he spied Doc Crawford riding like the wind. Then Nick Zastrow broke into view, and presently Black and Lentner. They were strung out, each beating his horse fiercely. And the fugitive knew he would have to elude them somehow. To chance merely outdistancing the four was to invite disaster if his pony stepped in a hole.

"There won't be any dallyin' if they get me, either," he panted, turning front and again whipping rein-ends to the pony's neck. "There'll just be a corpse layin' somewhere around here, hoss—and it'll be me!"

BUT there were hills ahead, the east arm of the Prospector chain. And Steele saw his lead slowly widening, saw a mass of tall, needlelike rocks in which a man could stop and fight if need be, or from which he could take an unexpected direction to lose himself.

The last was what he wanted. Beyond the half-mile of rocks, where a spring gave off a nauseous iron odor, he abruptly left the trail and put the horse to a steep climb up a shale-littered slope. Reaching timber, he picked his way deeper and higher into it, then veered to the north.



An hour later saw him dismounting in a deep-shaded glen among quaking aspens and beechwoods. Seventy-five yards away was a spring, and a narrow lane among the trees would let him see any rider who came there. Steele loosened the saddle cinch of the pony, and catching its reins around a rock, let it browse for green moss and shoots of grass.

He was, he thought, safe from that irate quartet. The pony would betray anyone approaching by a flick of his ears, and Steele thought the deep woods hush would carry hoofbeats and voices well in advance of any surprise.

Taking off his sombrero he ruefully examined the U-shaped hole at the rear edge of its brim. That bullet had been close! He fingered the bandage Mona Garrison had taped neatly on the back of his head, but his wound was all right. Hitching his corduroy trousers and gun-belt, he looked around, then sought a comfortable seat against a tree. Commencing to build a cigarette, he considered his next move.

"Well, I sure found out what they're up to! And there must really be millions in gold under Bearpaw. Those fellows think so, and Jack Beacham, too."

He quirked a cheek muscle as he sealed and shaped his cigarette. "Wish Beacham

or Mona had told me what's what. It'd have saved a heap of trouble. They'd still have the money, I reckon.

"But the way things are now, it won't do any good for me to go back to the Diamond G. I doubt if Jack and Mona would be there. Also, it's a long way."

Lighting his smoke, he settled for a nap. "Better wait till about nightfall and then ride into Bearpaw. I was on my way there anyhow, and it can't be far from here. Best thing I can do is have a talk with the sheriff and see if he can throw any more light on this deal."

The real Nick Zastrow, he reflected, would be a dangerous man for him to meet. From what Lentner had said, Zastrow was one of those thoroughly bad individuals one meets now and then. At fourteen he seemed to have got into a shooting serious enough so that his father shipped him away in the hope of reform. But Steele knew Nick never would reform. He was a typical gun-tough of the worst stripe.

"And that Doc Crawford's sure no angel," he muttered. "That fishy look he wears kind of gives me the creeps. He's a gunman for gold, cold blooded as Doc Halliday was in the days of the Earps down in Tombstone. Crawford's full up to the neck with greed, and from the neck on he's packed with poison for anybody gets in his way."

AT eight o'clock that night the greasy window of John's Eatery in Bearpaw showed only three customers seated at the rough pine counter. John himself, an ex-cow camp cook, was in his kitchen washing dishes with a loud clatter and bang, now and again leaning back to glance at his customers, then at the dirty-faced clock on the wall. Plainly, he was inviting the trio to finish their late meals and depart.

The two cowboys slid off their stools. Reaching for a toothpick in a glass, one of them studied Flash Steele a moment.

Then he flung a half-dollar on the counter beside his companion's payment, and the two took themselves outside.

Steele heard them meet and talk briefly with someone out there. He could not see them far in the dark of Bearpaw's main street. Voices drifted away as he finished his second piece of canned cherry pie, wiped his mouth, and called a question to John.

"Seventy cents. G'night," John returned briefly, and hurried his dishwashing, thinking of his pinochle partners awaiting him over at the Apex Saloon.

Steele got his hat and drew it on carefully, pulled on his corduroy jacket, and sauntered back to the kitchen. He did not see the narrow-faced man intently watching through the front window, nor know that the watcher stepped to the front door in an effort to hear what was said. Nick Zastrow held his breath, listening.

"Say, I kind of remember your sheriff here's an old friend of a friend of mine," Steele remarked. "What's his name again?"

"Ain't got a sheriff here. We got a marshal. The county sheriff's down at Centerline, and he don't bother to come up here much. Marshal's all the watchdog we need. He's plenty. Name of Exley."

"No-o, I don't think that was it. But I may as well look him up and make sure. Where's his office, down the street?"

"Down the alley. But take the front sidewalk to Sol Goldman's clothing store. Then turn back. It's past the bank."

"Oh, you have a bank here? Seems to me," Steele ruminated, "I heard something lately about a robbery? Wasn't it here?"

John blinked startledly. His mouth fell open. But then he closed it, gave a furtive smile, and shook his head. "No, couldn't have been here, mister. We ain't had any bank stickup. Never did have one that I remember."

Thanking him, Steele betook himself

outside. As he gained the sidewalk a man who had been there strode quickly across the street. His back looked somewhat familiar, but peering after him Steele concluded he was mistaken.

Following John's directions, he stopped a few minutes later in a passage between buildings and almost to the alley. A crude white sign *Marshal* was on the door of a structure that appeared to be the rear of the clothing store buildings. Steele let himself into a small, square office, bare except for a paper-littered desk, two chairs, and a series of cardboard files heaped in a corner. No one was in the place but as Steele turned the oil lamp higher, deciding to wait, a short, wiry, leather-skinned man of forty came up the two steps with the stealth of an Indian.

"Howdy. I'm Marshal Exley. Saw you head this way so I come along. What do you want?"

STEELE smiled at the bluntness of the officer. "Let's close the door, Marshal."

This done, Steele glanced at the windows to make sure they were closed, then faced the little man. "I'd like your advice and a little talk. I'm a Special Ranger doing little jobs here and there for Big Jim Maridale. Governor Maridale, I should say," he grinned. "Name of Flash Steele. There seems to be something going on—"

Exley's exclamation made him break off. The marshal cocked his head and scanned his visitor from head to feet with honest metal-gray eyes. He sucked in a low whistle. Taking off his Stetson, he sailed it onto a wall hook.

"Y'are, eh?" he said. "Steele!"

"Yes."

Exley scratched in his iron gray hair, leaned to squirt tobacco juice into a sawdust-filled cigar box. He went to his desk chair and dropped in it. "Well, I'll be damned!" Then he remembered tersely:

"How do I know you are?"

Steele dug out the fourth cartridge to the left of the buckle of his loop belt. Extracting the lead, he removed the tightly rolled onionskin sheet packed into the shell. Opening it, he offered it to the lawman.

Exley read it several times. Plainly he was impressed, and he looked relieved. Handing it back, he mopped his forehead, then looked hard at Steele putting the letter back in its receptacle.

"Governor send you here?"

"No. I was expectin' to pick up orders in a letter that may be waiting. On the way I ran into a few things, and thought maybe I can be of some help. It's not my desire to interfere, Marshal—"

"The heck with that. I ain't touchy. Let's get down to cases. What do you know, Ranger?"

Steele sketched his experiences to date, leaving out nothing, and as he talked felt increasing confidence in pert, candid Marshal Exley. He bore the stamp of a typical honest Western town lawman. His quiet, yet sharp manner, gave the impression that Exley feared nothing that lived. He was heart and soul in his job and proud of the badge he wore, to judge by the way he absently rubbed it to a higher polish with the cuff of his sleeve.

"And you say Jefferson Black's one of 'em, Ranger? Hard to believe! Why, Black's one of the foremost citizens of this town. President of our bank. One of the prime movers, after Jack Beacham, in collectin' that fund."

"It was Black, all right. They told me his name and his occupation. And I think I can see why he wanted to see that fund collected," Steele pointed out dryly. "By the way, Marshal; have you had a bank robbery lately?"

Exley leaned back in his squeaky chair. He nodded, sighing. "Yes, we have. Last Monday night. Hardly anybody knows it. Only Jeff Black, and Beacham, and me. If we let it out, this town'd go loco. Why, that fund means the savin's of every fam-

ily here! And a bunch o' the cattlemen down in the valley, too.

"Black come sweatin' in here Tuesday mornin', told me his place had been burglarized. Jack Beacham happened along, and the three of us went to look. Giant powder used on the safe. They jimmied the back door that I've told Black time and again ought to have a better lock and a good, sound bolt. Took a heap of bonds and such—and of course, that fifty-five thousand fund. That was the main thing. Later, Beacham found most of the other stuff scattered in the alley."

Steele said nothing as he tipped his chair against the wall.

"Later still," Exley went on, "Beacham came to me and swore that he suspected crookedness. Just a hunch tied up with seein' Doc Crawford skulkin' toward the XL house Tuesday evenin'. I told Beacham he was crazy, because that very day Black got another letter from Crawford about sellin' his Kitty shaft, and it came from Silverton, Colorado."

"That could be worked, of course."

"Reckon so. I ain't so surprised at Paul Lentner bein' in any skullduggery; he's a slippery cuss. Built up the XL with a long rope that only swung nights. I've told the sheriff over to Centerline again and again Lentner's a crook. But it ain't my business; I work for this town. As for Pete Zastrow," he added, "he lived honest the last eight-ten years, I guess. Don't know what he was before that. But his son Nick is a born hellion of the worst stripe. So he's back, eh? Hates me like a rattler hates hoss-hair!"

"Is there really plenty of gold under the town?"

"Millions!" He let that sink in, then went on:

"Beacham discovered it helpin' his feed store uncle put in a cellar. Beacham runs the 2 X 4, a little cow outfit," he explained. "But Jack ain't hardly thought of steers the last couple months.

"Course, we keep the thing a dead se-

cret—give every stranger the bum's rush. Reckon there ain't a word leaked out. The hull population here's in on it, but some we can't trust don't even know, not yet. You can see we had to keep mighty still until we buy the old Kitty shaft 'longside Charlie Selby's saloon. Once we own every foot inside town limits, the Bearpaw Minin' Company will start passin' out gold like the U. S. Mint!"

STEELE lighted a cigarette and smoked awhile in silence. Marshal Exley rose and began to pace up and down. He halted, turning.

"The question is, how can we get back that fifty-five thousand in time to take up Crawford's option on the Kitty? They've hid the money somewhere. And just to accuse Black, Lentner, and the others wouldn't get us anywhere. They'd still have the money hid. But if folks find out tomorrow noon that we haven't bought the option, and that their money's gone—say, they'll go wild! They'll stampede to hell-an'-gone! They'll lynch Beacham, popular as he is. And we'll be licked!"

Steele got slowly to his feet, eyes narrowed, lips pursed.

"Marshal, I've got it! Can you call a town meetin' tonight?"

"What! And tell 'em their money's gone? You want me and Beacham tore limb from limb? And shucks," he added, "it's after nine now."

"Doesn't matter if it's midnight or two in the morning! Listen, before we call it, could you pick up Jefferson Black and Lentner and either Doc Crawford or Nick Zastrow? Any three of them?"

"Why—saw Black go in the Apex half an hour ago. Reckon I could get Lentner and Zastrow if they're home. Prob'ly are, too." He cocked his head as comprehension came to him. "Say! You'll talk to the meetin', eh? Tell folks exactly what happened to you, just like you told me. Everybody's heard of Flash Steele, and they'll believe every word of it. Mean-

while I'll stand hid with Black, Lentner, and Zastrow. At the right moment, when the crowd's half wild over hearin' the plot and about their money stolen—"

"That's it. You bring your prisoners out to show 'em. What with the crowd sore at them—"

"And since any three o' them control the Kitty Mine, they'll have to sign it over right then and there for one dollar, cash, and be dam' glad they can save their necks by doin' it!"

Steele's eyes held the marshal's. "And it'll work—and without botherin' to find that fifty-five thousand! Though we'll make 'em turn it over, o' course."



Exley pounded a fist into his other palm. He sprang for his hat on the wall hook.

"By gosh, I'll start right this—"

He never finished his declaration. Turning slightly to follow the marshal with his eyes, Steele glimpsed the lamplight-yellowed metal of two six-gun muzzles at the alley window. And had stabbing realization that both he and Exley were marked to die.

"Drop!" he ejaculated, and leaped sideways as he drew.

Two explosions and two vivid stabs of fire came so close together as almost to seem blended in one. The first bullet drilled Marshal Exley in the back, just under his left shoulder blade. The second, intended for Steele, grazed his ribs, carrying the coal oil lamp off the corner of Exley's desk and smashing to bits on the floor.

CHAPTER VI

LYNCH FEVER

STEELE fired twice at the window as the office became inky black. Then he darted to the door, jerked it open, and burst outside. There came running steps, a snarl followed by an abrupt cry. A gun roared, then came a thud as of two forms colliding and hurtling into the dust.

The sounds seemed to emanate from around the corner of Marshal Exley's office where the assassin had lurked at the alley window. Steele turned the corner and seemed to make out vaguely a dark form on the ground several yards ahead. He rushed just as a man sprang erect. He fired at Steele but missed. The Ranger was still running as he squeezed his trigger. But before the shot came he kicked something and pitched headlong on his face.

He was scrambling up the next moment, spitting dust, and rubbing his eyes. A moan sounded close to him. Startled, he flung himself back, and grabbed the figure by an arm and a shoulder. It was limp in his hands. Then soft, silken hair brushed his forearm as another moan came.

Steele gave an exclamation. It was Mona Garrison.

He held her sitting upright while with one hand he raked the ground, searching for his gun. The man who had collided with Mona and whom she had battled pluckily could be heard making good his escape. Steele found his gun, jammed it in his holster, and called Mona's name.

He tensed. A shout sounded from the street. "Exley's murdered!"

Another voice took it up. Then several voices sounded slightly louder, as if men were rushing out of the Apex Saloon and from Charlie Selby's saloon across the street.

"—ambushed Exley through the window!"

"Marshal's dead! Somebody shot him!"

"Plug the alley, boys! Both ends! Couple of you fork hosses and ride out the end o' town! We got to grab him 'fore he gets away!"

The Ranger's eyes flashed in the dark. He heard Mona Garrison mumbling something as she stirred in his arms. Then he heard feet coming nearer. And men shouting as they reached the alley a hundred yards to the west.

Steele gathered the girl and lifted her in his arms. Turning, he went swiftly eastward along the rutty alley, searching the darkness of the night for a hiding place. For one of those voices was that of Jefferson Black and another was Paul Lentner. And it wouldn't do for him nor for Mona, to be caught by those rascals.

"—rassled with the killer, but he got away. Tore Nick's neckerchief off. Maybe he'll still have it!"

"You mean Nick Zastrow? When'd he get back?"

There were other shouts, but mention of Nick Zastrow made Steele's pulse pound faster. The thing was clear as a cold spring in the Prospector Hills. He could see through their plot, see at once what the conspirators hoped to gain.

BEARPAW was coming alive rapidly. The saloons were empty now and men were running into the alley, calling back and forth. Yonder to the north lights appeared in several homes. The shots and the shouts had awakened those who retired early. Then a husky voice that he knew instantly as Nick Zastrow's sounded through the doorway of the marshal's office, and throwing a glance over his shoulder, Steele saw matches alight in there.

"Exley got it through the back!"

Steele was abreast the stable, and turning, he hurried through its open doorway. Halting inside, he made out a looming object in the center of the floor that proved on closer inspection to be a stagecoach. Along one wall were several stalls, and

in some of these horses stomped fretfully.

He became aware of fumbling at his side and suddenly felt his six-gun drawn. Its muzzle jammed hard against his ribs and a voice close to his face said fiercely:

"Let me down! I—I'll shoot!"

"Wait, Mona! It's me—Flash Steele!"

She lay in his arms. "Flash Steele! Not the—"

"Yes, the Ranger. Here, can you stand? Hurt much?"

"N-no. He knocked me down, but I'm all right." But she swayed unsteadily when he put her on her feet. She still held his gun, and suddenly pressed it again to his side.

"I know your voice now. You're Mr. Brown. You stole that money from us! You're no more—"

"Mona, I tell you I am. Wait," he urged, really apprehensive that she would shoot, and fearful of snatching at the Colt lest the resultant struggle discharge it and lead to their capture. "I'm Flash Steele, all right, and when I took that cash from you and Beacham, it was because I thought he'd stolen it. Matter of fact, he had! He took it from those fellows in the saloon in that ghost town. 'Course, I know now he was entitled to it. But he didn't explain, Mona. Did he?"

His rushing words gave her pause. She seemed slowly to consider. "You swear you are?"

"You bet, and I'll prove it to you later. I was in Exley's office just now, talkin' this mine business over with him, when that gunman shot him down in cold blood. I was lucky he didn't get me."

He checked himself at a sudden thought. "What are you doing here? Was Beacham with you?"

The girl recoiled with a gasp. "Jack! Oh, Jack—Flash—he's back there! We were going to see the marshal. To tell him about Jefferson Black and the others, that they're crooked. There were shots. Jack ran at a man at the window. They

fought, and the man knocked Jack down. I tried to stop him, but—

"Come on!" she urged, and rushed past him for the doorway. "He may be hurt. He may be killed!"

Steele plunged after and grabbed her wrist, preventing her from running out in the alley. He was in the nick of time as two forms hurried past the stable.

"Who!" a man exclaimed incredulously.

"Jack Beacham, they say, Bill! Jack Beacham shot Exley through the window! Say, what's that mean? What about our minin' scheme? What about the option on the Kitty?"

"That's so! You don't figure he was up to somethin' and Exley found it out? So Jack had to kill him? I been afraid all along about trustin' so much money—"

Their talk was lost in shouts and exclamations from men gathering in the alley. Mona Garrison stood statue-like, a hand to her throat.

"Better come back in. Things are pretty roiled up right now." Steele drew her back in the barn. "But Mona, who was the killer? Did you get a look at him?"

She turned slowly, gazing at him in horror. Then numbly shook her head. "Don't know his—his name. Oh, Jack!" she whispered.

"Brace up, Mona. Nothing's happened yet. But we're only two, and there must be twenty of 'em out there. Our play is to wait."

"Here he is! I found 'im, boys! Jack Beacham, I'll be damned!"

"Beacham! What'd he want to kill Mike Exley for? Why, Jack—"

"Yeah," Paul Lentner snarled, "I just wonder why! Beacham's head of our mine scheme, isn't he? Well, I'll tell you why he shot Exley down in cold blood. Because a few of us got suspicious and went to Exley and told him we think Jack Beacham is tryin' to cheat this town. Cheat it out of that fund we raised, and—"

A hubbub drowned his words. But presently it died and Lentner went on:

"Well, you know Mike Exley. Did know him," he corrected grimly. "He liked Jack same as all of us, and he wouldn't believe Jack's been tamperin' with our mine plan. But he said he'd call him in for a talk and find out. So that's why you just found Beacham. He shot Exley, sure as Christmas! Killed him right through that there window instead of walkin' in for the talk Exley wanted."

There was a short pause.

"That's right," the husky tones of Nick Zastrow floated up the alley. "It's dead to rights, folks! And I'll explain why Beacham's layin' there stunned. I thought he was killed. I'm the one that got him."

"Now listen," he went on amid murmurs of surprise. "Maybe you don't all know me. Well, I'm Nick, Pete Zastrow's son. Come home to be with my father when he died. Now, when I left town years back I had a fallin' out with Exley. So tonight I decided to have a man-to-man talk and convince him I've changed a lot. Wanted to be friends. I rode in town and had a beer at the Apex. Some of you saw me there—"

"That's right, Zastrow."

"I saw you there, Nick, Talked to you," Jefferson Black assured. "You said you were going to tell the marshal how you've behaved ever since you left Bearpaw. You told me you wanted to be friends with Exley, that you liked him."

"Thanks, mister. That's what I said, all right. And didn't you tell me he was prob'ly in his office right then? So didn't I walk out o' the saloon to go see him?"

"That's right, Zastrow."

"Sure. I know that's right. I heard you," another man supported.

"Well, I came back to the alley and walked toward the office. I was just goin' to turn in to the door when I see something under the window. The next thing, the feller stood up and shot. I pulled my gun, tryin' to capture him. We

shot a few times—you heard it. He dropped, and figurin' I'd killed him, I chased his accomplice."

"You mean he had somebody with him?"

"That explains it!" Jefferson Black exclaimed. "I was first out of the Apex, and I distinctly saw someone run across the street up near the old Kitty Mine shaft. Then Zastrow here popped out, following. But he lost trail of the—" He broke off suddenly.

"Lost the trail of what?" a townsman demanded.

"Gentlemen, I—I well, I don't like to say it."

"What do you mean! You know who it was, Banker? Then tell!"

"We won't stand for you hidin' anybody, don't care who he is!"

STEELE and Mona stood tense, straining their ears to catch every word. Their eyes met in the dark, and Steele felt the girl lean wearily against him.

"All right, if I must. But I—I thought at the time the person running was a woman."

Exclamations came from the ever-swelling throng of men. Nick Zastrow said in a half-guilty tone:

"Banker, I wasn't goin' to say it either. But that's just what I thought. There was kind of a womanish sound there in the alley. Reckon it was some girl, all right."

"Here—Beacham's all right now. Talk up, damn you, Jack! Was that Mona Garrison with you?"

"You fools!" Beacham snapped. "Why should I kill Mike Exley? Is this what I get for trying to stop a man from—"

"Stop who? If you didn't do it, then who did?"

"I—don't know. I saw someone there, and Mona and—"

"It was her!" Black exclaimed in horror. "A girl accompanying her lover to kill a town marshal! Gentlemen, I feel

it my duty to reveal something more, something about the money raised to buy the old Kitty Mine and start the Bearpaw Mining Company in business. I—er, promised Beacham yesterday not to mention it. But this matter changes things, and—"

"Come on, Jeff, talk out!"

"What is it? What else'd he do?"

"Well," Black admitted reluctantly, "Beacham came to me yesterday and withdrew the fifty-five thousand dollars of our fund. He being in charge of it, I couldn't refuse. So I paid it to him. But now—"

"That's a lie!" Beacham shouted. "You stole—"

"Where's that money, Jack!" a bass voice thundered.



There were other howled demands for it. They lessened at a sudden commotion, as if Beacham were struggling to break free. But the throng was too close-packed, his accusers too numerous.

"I haven't got the fund!" he shouted wrathfully. "They're fillin' you full of lies! Zastrow and Lentner and—"

A chorus of indignant yells drowned him out. The bass voice boomed:

"We ought to lynch him, that's what! If he killed Mike—"

Again there rose a hubbub, and the pair crouching in the stage barn doorway heard the cry taken up. "Lynch him!"

"Make him tell where that money is!"

"We'll make him talk, boys! Let's get down to them willows! Put a rope around his neck and it'll bring out the truth!"

The proposal caused brief pause. Then someone seconded it. The cry was taken up.

"Let's go right now! We trusted Jack Beacham and he's cheated us! Make him tell what he did with that money!"

"Yeah, and don't forget, he shot Mike Exley in the back!"

THE crowd started briskly westward along the alley. In the doorway Mona clutched Steele's arm, straining to see his face in the dark.

"You—you aren't going to *do* anything?" she whispered in horror.

"Ssh! Wait till they get started." His jaw set and leaning, he peered after the throng. Then he turned to Mona.

"You bet we're goin' to do something. We got to gamble, and the odds are pretty long. But it would have been foolish to try to get Jack away from 'em right now when they were so heated up. And they had him in the center of the bunch. We couldn't have grabbed him!"

"No," he said, turning away from her to pace the barn tensely. "It's got to be something else. Something better. But I figure I know—"

"What? Oh let's hurry!"

He caught her elbows and shook her. "Get hold of yourself, Mona! And don't worry. Now; you got a gun?" As she shook her head he started to lead her to the alley. "Then we'll get you one at Exley's office. Get a carbine apiece, too, maybe. You know where the willows are they talked about?"

"Yes."

She asked no further questions as they hurried down the now deserted alley to the office of the marshal. Steele left Mona outside since, in their fury, the Bearpaw citizens had left the body of Mike Exley where it had fallen. The Ranger came out with weapons and passed a carbine and a six-gun to the girl. He had a cartridge belt for her which she could don later.

They went cautiously to the single street of Bearpaw. In a matter of minutes they had Steele's horse, then picked up the animals Mona and Jack had ridden in, tethered to the rail in front of the feed store belonging to Beacham's uncle. Mounting and leading Jack's roan, they went out of town to the south and swung in a quarter-circle toward the heightening red glow of a fire around which the lynch-mad crowd could be seen milling.

Two hundred yards away Steele halted. He leaned and handed the reins of Beacham's horse to Mona.

"I'm going ahead. When I get there, you follow. But go up slow, and be careful they don't notice you. Don't do a thing unless I have trouble. I'll whistle loud as I can. When you hear that, come, and come shooting! Understand? Then it'll be a gamble whether we get Jack, and whether we get away ourselves."

As she hesitated he added, "Mona, you're a girl. You don't have to do this. I don't want you to. But—"

"Yes." Her voice was very low, insistent. "Yes, I have to do it. I—love him. And I understand!"

He patted her arm. Then he urged his horse forward. Putting it to a gallop, he rode boldly straight for the crowd milling around the fire at the willows. His heart pounded slowly and hard as, every instant expecting a bullet from the lynchers, he reviewed again, swiftly, what he meant to do.

The carbine lay across his saddle. His six-gun was reloaded and ready. But they would be little aid unless sheer audacity carried him through.

Steele slowed as his approach caused men on the fringe of the crowd to turn and challenge him sharply. Over their heads he could see Jack Beacham standing under one of the tall willow trees, still protesting his innocence but going unheard. Two men watched him hawk-like. Two others were arranging a rope over a thick limb of the tree. Beacham.

he noted with relief, was not tied in any way.

"Hey there! Who're you?"

"Hold on, stranger! Don't come any nearer!"

He kept his horse walking, and automatically men fell back, forming a lane. A dozen guns raised. He held up his hand commandingly.

"I've business with you men. If you plug me you'll be sorry! I want to talk to your leaders!"

The cool confidence of his tone and bearing made them indecisive. Steele passed safely through the outer fringe of lynchers. Deliberately he kept his horse trudging on to the cleared space around the fire. He saw Jack Beacham start at recognition of him; then Beacham's eyes lost their lustre as his sudden hope dwindled away.

Steele halted beside Beacham, turning his horse to face the men. He saw some with jaws agape, others bristling yet uncertain. He could not locate Jefferson Black, but easily found Paul Lentner back in the throng, and Nick Zastrow only a few feet away, helping to arrange the rope. Doc Crawford, of course, was not here, since it was generally believed he was in Colorado.

"What the devil do you want? Who are you?" The owner of the bass voice, a heavily built and formidable-looking rancher, swaggered closer to Steele.

"That's right, Tom! What the devil's he interferin' for?"

He held up both hands for silence, the carbine balanced across his saddle. Growls and muttering died away.

"Men, I happened to hear this excitement, so I wanted to find out what it's about. I gather someone killed your marshal—"

"That's right! Jack Beacham shot him in the back! Murdered him!"

"Who're you?" another voice snarled. "What do you want?"

"If your marshal is dead, is there any

other law men in your town? None, eh? Then it's my duty to remind you of the seriousness of what you're doing. Lynch law is dead in this country, men., Anyone who takes part in lynching is liable for murder!"

He let that sink in.

"Furthermore, as a law officer, it's my duty to take charge of your prisoner if there seems basis for a charge against him. Now, I don't want to have to arrest you all. You're excited, and naturally you're angry about the killing of your marshal. But take my advice; don't do anything you'll be sorry for!"

There was a short silence. Steele gestured with both hands.

"Disperse, men. I'll give you two minutes. Your prisoner is my prisoner now."

Hesitation marked the upturned faces. Steele's nerves felt taut as wires. The silence seemed endless.

Would his bluff work?

CHAPTER VII

DOC CRAWFORD'S PLAY

THE burly individual called Tom wiped a hand across his lips. He glanced around, then glared jeeringly up at Steele.

"That's purty big talk, stranger. Who's givin' it? You claim you're the law. Well, what law are you, exactly?"

"I'm Flash Steele. I'm a Special State Ranger. I represent Governor Maridale. And if your marshal is dead and this man accused of killing him, I'm taking charge here. I'll serve you the best I can for the time being. But you've got to disperse—an," he added, "right now!"

"Flash Steele, he said!"

"Phew! Say, I heard o'—"

"Cripes! He's the feller Maridale sends around! Cleaned up more gangs than—"

"Hold on here!" Jefferson Black suddenly forced his way to the clearing, and crossed it to confront the Ranger. "Who'd you say you are?"

"Flash Steele. I'll prove it if you—"

"You!" sneered Black. "You Flash Steele! Say, that's a good one! Folks, listen!" He turned to face them. "I know who he is—I've seen him! He tried to pull the wool over my eyes before!"

"I know him too," Lentner cried, hurrying to Black. "Why, he's not Flash Steele, nothin' but a dam' gunman! Pretended he was Pete Zastrow's son Nick. Went around for a whole day makin' out that he inherited Nick's share of what his father had. Boys, I swear that's the truth. Ain't it, Jeff Black?"

"He told me he was Nick Zastrow. Here—Nick!" he called.

Steele tried to talk, but the growls of the throng drowned his words. Nick Zastrow appeared beside him, rose on tiptoes, and stared at him.

"That's the hombre," he vowed. "He posed as me, sure as I stand here, men! Why, to prove to you he's crooked, that's my hoss he's forkin' right now."

Steele's heart sank with the knowledge that his genuine authority meant nothing now. The jig was up.

He jerked the carbine to his shoulder. A shrill whistle left his lips, and as he was uttering it he prayed that Mona Garrison would understand that their plight was desperate.

"Reach!" he yelled. "Every man reach, and reach high!"

With a snarl Nick Zastrow plunged to get behind him. He was drawing as he went. And Steele, twisting in his saddle, clenched the trigger of the carbine. It thundered, but the bullet missed Zastrow to bore into the ground.

In a fury of disgust the Ranger flung the carbine at the nearest of Beacham's guards.

He whisked out his six-gun as he was pivoting Nick Zastrow's tan pony. The men of Bearpaw were just coming out of their blank astonishment but Zastrow, Black, Lentner, and their ally called Tom — all were quicker thinking. All comprehended that Flash Steele was gam-

bling now on a split-minute rescue of Jack Beacham.

LUCK played with the Ranger on the first exchange. His gun sounded before the savage Zastrow's. Nick staggered, and a howl broke from his lips. The bullet had smacked against the cylinder-edge of his gun, jamming it with club-like force against the heel of his palm. That force was sufficient to flash pain up his arm and almost hurl him against Beacham.

Quick-wittedly, Jack pounced on him. His fist hooked Zastrow's jaw under his ear. He yanked away the second six-gun Zastrow held in his left hand, and the two fought for it like dogs for a bone.

Meanwhile Steele was spurring his pony straight at Jefferson Black. The banker leaped aside, again displaying his gun prowess, whipping out his weapon in movement that was a blur in the firelight. But Steele's .45 muzzle drove through Black's hat and to his skull before the banker could shoot. Dazed, he stumbled and went down. The next instant Steele was shooting it out with the rough-looking individual called Tom.

Something skimmed his lean jaw. He twisted his head sharply at the pain, but when he glanced for his opponent he saw Tom full length on the ground, a black mark in his forehead. And knew the fellow was dead.

But there was Lentner coming, and others of the throng whipping out guns. And there was Beacham to get away. Somehow!

Steele fired twice into the crowd. It was a thing he hated to do. Yet those men were against him. They were grimly intent on claiming his life if they could. He directed one shot toward Lentner and saw the rancher's sombrero snatched away. Then, spurring his horse, he turned all attention on Jack Beacham.

Beacham was down!

Steele felt at that instant that their

gamble was lost. But throwing himself sideways, he leaned far to the right, his gun shifted to his left hand gripping reins and the saddle horn. He lunged out, clutched Beacham's shirt at the chest. The horse bolted. Beacham was dragged after, the weight of him over the bumpy ground all but breaking the grip Steele had and tumbling him head-first.

Somehow he held on. To fall was to await death at the hands of the crowd. And the Bearpaw men were shooting now, but wildly, as they milled and yelled. The tan pony veered at the tug of that weight on his right—sped halfway around the fire as a bullet cut the Ranger's shoulder.



"Jack! Flash!" Mona Garrison cried.

He managed a look and saw her bearing down. Steele released Beacham, shouting at him. He was ready to swing out of the saddle but saw Beacham pull himself together. Suddenly Jack was on his feet, a little dazed but fully aware of their rife danger. And twisting to shoot back twice more over the heads of the men surging after them, Steele knew Beacham was throwing himself into the saddle of his own horse.

"Flash!" Mona cried again.

He shot a last time, and his gun was empty. The Ranger straightened to the front, and dug spurs at the ribs of the tan pony. It leaped, snorting with pain and fright. Leaped so that its muzzle brushed the flank of the animal Mona bestrode. Then, with Beacham ahead, ducking low branches of the willows that seemed to swoop at them, they raced away in the night.

Steele lost sight of his companions, but

for awhile seemed to hear the rumble of their horses' hoofs. Even when they died away, he was not worried. He had seen no horses near the scene of the intended lynching, and thought it would take pursuit some minutes to get under way.

The townfolk, he thought, might even not undertake pursuit at this hour of the night. They would acknowledge their temporary defeat and fall to arguing why Jack Beacham had killed Marshal Exley, whether their mining company was wrecked, and whether the bold stranger actually had been Flash Steele, the famous Ranger.

But Zastrow, Lentner, and Jefferson Black might give chase. They wanted Beacham and needed him. He stood between them and complete domination of Bearpaw for their scheme to loot property owners there of the wealth under the town. Now Marshal Exley was gone, there was no other leader in the Bearpaw Mining Company project. That much had been apparent in the mob spirit. With Jefferson Black, their banker, and Lentner and Zastrow working against the interests of townfolk, they were certain to be victimized. But to guarantee the success of their betrayal, the crooks needed to silence Beacham.

"Pshaw, but Jack got away!" Steele told himself with grim triumph. "And Mona and I agreed that if we couldn't stick together, we'd meet out at her spread. So I'd better get on there. And it's goin' to be a nice meeting, because we've still got twelve hours before that option's up. Somehow we're going to win!"

Though the problem yet remaining, of paying off Doc Crawford for his option, was a baffling one, Steele felt almost exuberant. They had a fighting chance!

HE WAS safe now, and let the pony drop to a walk. A few minutes saw him on the floor of the valley between the two arms of the Prospector Hills. He

kept on toward the west, trying to envision the shortest way to Mona Garrison's Diamond G Ranch which he had visited only that once when she took him in, wounded.

In thirty minutes he was drawing close to a heavy rumbling herd of cattle. They would be on their way to market, he knew. This was the market season, and Jefferson Black had commented that ranchers around here had not yet disposed of their fall stock. At sight of a rider coming around the bulk of the cattle, Steele rode to intercept him. In the starlight the rider saw him and changed his course.

"Howdy," the cowboy greeted as they drew rein. He leaned to peer at Steele. "Oh! Thought you were Bud Cassidy of the 545 outfit."

"No, I am a stranger. Name of Flash Steele. Have—"

The man's exclamation checked him. He verified his statement, and feeling the friendliness of the cowboy, gave a rapid summary of the happenings tonight in Bearpaw. The cowboy gaped, thunderstruck.

"Heck, and I never heard a word of any gold strike! Why, I—I'd like to get in on that, mister! You say it's all sewed up tight?"

"Afraid it is. I don't know details. But what I'm gettin' at is, have you seen Jack Beacham within the last hour or two? Or Miss Garrison?"

"No, sir, I haven't. Heard a couple of shots awhile ago. But I didn't meet anybody. Them cows make so much noise I wouldn't hear any hosses," he pointed out.

"That's true. You're bound for Centerline, I take it?"

"Sure thing. We'll get there about dawn. See, there's two more outfits goin' to ship tomorrow, and we're first out."

"I wonder if you'd do a favor for me when you get there? You knew Marshal Exley, I suppose, and you can see that

things are in pretty much of a mess. There's no law in Bearpaw now, just when they need it the worst. Will you call on the sheriff as soon as you hit Centerline? Tell him all I've told you. Say you talked with Flash Steele. Ask him to come along up here as fast as he can."

"All right, I'll do it. You can depend on me, Mister Steele."

He hesitated. "Say, you been in some pretty big scrapes, ain't you? I read about you in the papers that time them fellers kidnapped Governor Maridale. About that free range bill in the legislature. And I've heard how you rounded up a couple of counterfeiterers just lately. Feller rode up to the ranch this mornin', said he just came from back in the hills. He said—"

Steele smiled. "Thanks, cowboy. I've been lucky, is all. You'll do that favor for me, then?"

"You bet I will, Mister Steele! Say," he invited warmly, "when this thing blows over, stop in at the 545 Ranch, will you? I know the boys would sure like to meet you."

"Thanks again, and I'll try to do that. So long."

"So long!" the rider called admiringly, and sat his horse watching Flash Steele vanish into the night.

IT TOOK him more than an hour to locate the Garrison ranch headquarters. As he rode to the corral and dismounted, then went to open the gate, someone came out of the lighted house. It was not Mona, but one of her riders. The man approached a little warily.

"Is that Steele?"

"Yes. Thought I'd give Nick Zastrow's hoss a rest. He's worked a long day. Did Miss Garrison get home safely?"

The cowboy hitched his trousers. "Yes. Mona's in there, all right. But she's cryin'. 'Cause Jack Beacham didn't get here. And," he added grimly, "he won't."

"What! Why not? Beacham didn't get killed?"

"He may be by now. A fellow Mona thinks must be Doc Crawford ambushed 'em. He shot Mona across the temple. When she came to, Beacham and Crawford were gone."

Steele reached out for the corral gate for support. Thunderstruck, he could not speak for a moment. Just when he had thought there was a chance to wreck the conspirators' plans—this had to happen!

The wily and flint-hearted Doc Crawford must have watched that lynch scene. He dared not show himself, because Bearpaw folk had no suspicion that he was in this district. Sight of him would cause participants in the town mining company to demand action at once on his option.

He stared at the cowboy. Without knowing what he did, he took out a bullet-torn sack of tobacco, a wad of papers, and began to build a cigarette.

Steele gave a low whistle.

"Mona says they'll sure kill Jack. And I reckon they will, all right. Listen, Steele," the other said urgently, "I've heard tell plenty about you. Heard that you never get plumb discouraged. You never get really licked.

"Now look, Jack Beacham's a good friend o' mine. And he's goin'—he was to marry my boss. "So" he ended simply, "what are you goin' to do? What are *we* goin' to do?"

STEELE felt a thrill of warmth. He lighted his cigarette, and his hands were trembling ever so little. The cowboy was right. He had never yet been whipped and he couldn't accept defeat now. There was a way to defeat Zastrow, Black, Lentner, and Crawford. There *must* be a way.

"Cowboy, shake, will you?"

"My name's Dave Meyer, Steele."

"How many more like you on this outfit?"

"Well, there's four of us work for the Garrisons. Pa Garrison ain't home, you know."

"Four, eh? How many dependable men

could you get hold of in an hour, Dave?"

"Well— Maybe the boys from the Gatebar. But they're scattered out work-in', or maybe asleep. You see, most of the ranches just now—"

"Are marketing beef. I know. Can you raise ten men in all?"

"Sure. I figure I can. What you aim-in' to do?"

"There's nothing to do, Dave, but search for Jack Beacham. And get at it pronto! Look, I figure those hellions won't kill him for awhile. Why? Because Jack is president of the Bearpaw Mining Company. He could sign over the Company's claims in Bearpaw—and they amount to every square foot except the Kitty shaft. Now those crooks want that, don't they? And while they've got Beacham, won't they try to get it from him?"

"Sure! Then they won't have to buck the town and—"

"Exactly. It adds up to this; they'll take Jack somewhere. They'll probably demand he sign over the Bearpaw Company rights. He'll refuse. Maybe they'll torture him. That ought to give us time, hadn't it, to search? And those fellows won't be in such a special hurry, either, since they've got to hide Crawford anyhow until noon tomorrow—or, I guess, it's today now."

Dave Meyer whistled. "That's right! But where we goin' to search? Where do you figure they might have Jack?"

He drew a long inhale from his cigarette. He was tired and hungry, but of a sudden new vigor seemed to flow through his veins.

"I don't know, Dave. We'll just have to search everywhere. So let's get started, cowboy!"

CHAPTER VIII

GHOST TOWN DWELLERS

AT seven o'clock the following morning Flash Steele walked to the doorway of the big gray barn that stood be-

hind Paul Lentner's house on the XL ranch. He stood awhile munching the last of the sandwiches he had made for himself in Mona Garrison's kitchen. His eyes studied the house, then ran along the horizon line of the Prospector Hills. Steele walked outside, and leaning against the yard fence, gazed at the range rolling gently to the west.

"No signal yet. Not even a cloud in the sky, let alone smoke."

He remembered his last visit here, and how he had escaped through the XL barnyard after the real Nick Zastrow had suddenly confronted Crawford, Black, Lentner and himself in the living room of the house. That seemed a long time ago, and much had happened since.

There still was no smoke anywhere in the sky. His agreement with Dave Meyer had been to signal discovery of the gang in the old Indian fashion. Before daylight shots were to suffice, but there had been no shots that he had heard. Since dawn he had watched the sky, but the absence of the signal meant none of the searching groups had found any trace of the kidnappers.

Meyer was to divide as many men as he could enlist into groups, sending them in varying directions. The search of the valley would thus be methodical, and Steele knew the cowboys, experts on sign, should pick up the fresh tracks of a group of horses if any existed.

Going back for his Diamond G horse tethered indoors, Steele dragged him out of the barn and slowly mounted. He decided to ride westward to the home of Jack Beacham on the slender chance that the captors had taken their man to his own place. Mona had told him how the small 2 x 4 could be reached.

It was, he saw on arrival, fittingly called the 2 x 4. Beacham's house was only three rooms and the barn was correspondingly small. Everything about the place, however, showed signs of care, except that the house looked as if it had not

been lived in for several days. The few horses in the corral were without water until Steele pumped some, and a brown mare in a stall in the barn, her right foreleg tightly bandaged as if she had suffered



an injury, proved ravenous when he brought feed.

Completing the necessary chores about the place, Steele went out to mount and ride again—anywhere. He sat his horse a moment gazing at the west arm of the Prospector Hills. They loomed blue-green, tan, and reddish in spots, looking very close, though he knew they were several miles away. He was turning over in his mind the possibility that Meyer's cowboys had overlooked some track, some sign, along the fringe of the hills. Or that they had not yet covered this district.

Then in surprise he sighted a lone rider coming toward him from the southeast. As it neared he knew it was Mona. She recognized him and hurried as he advanced to meet her. She said nothing for a moment, scanning his face; and he saw her look away discouragedly and bite her lips.

"Cheer up," he urged with a forced smile. "We've got time yet! Those fellows must have been played out by the time they collected—wherever they did collect. Crawford would hold Jack somewhere until Lentner, Black, and Zastrow could get hosses and ride out to join him. There's still time, Mona. We've got hours!"

He added, "I don't think you should have come. You're not feelin' too good with those stitches in your head."

She raised a hand instinctively and touched the large bandage partly covering her cheek and temple, held on by adhesive strips and by her Stetson. She shook her head.

"The doctor said it would be all right. And it's terrible to wait. I just can't stay home. I didn't know whether you had planned to cover Jack's ranch, so I rode over.

"I want to go with you," she appealed. "I can't go back home and just pace the floor!"

"Well, all right. Let's start somewhere. I thought," he went on hopefully, "I'd just ride along the sand in front of those red rocks. Maybe we'll find something. Worth trying, anyhow. We could start yonder to the north, then head along southward for several miles. Can't think of anywhere else to go, can you?"

SHE shook her head. They put their mounts to a lope and in a few minutes reached the half-mile-long nest of high, pointed rocks through which Steele had come that first night as he searched for the lone holdup of the Midasville saloon. Walking their horses, they sought sign in the sand made of rock pulverized over the centuries.

"Let's turn south. Keep a sharp lookout. You never can tell when you'll find a clue," Steele said cheerfully.

The sun was hot, beating down on the valley and mirrored from the boulders that formed a jagged line along the feet of the hills. They let their horses walk, scanning the ground in silence. An hour passed, and Steele, becoming convinced they had failed again, strove to think of some likelier place for a clue.

"Flash!"

He turned to see Mona dropping off her horse, running a few feet, then halting to peer at something on the ground. Hurriedly Steele dismounted and ran to her as, stooping, she picked up an object that shone in the sun.

Mona held it in her flat palm. Their eyes raised and met.

"Pshaw," he said, "it's only a penny. Anyone might have dropped that, Mona. It might have been here a week or a month. Sorry to discourage you, but—" He shrugged, scowling.

She nodded numbly, and closed her fingers over the penny. Taking a long breath, she straightened and started back to her horse.

"Wait a minute!"

Mona Garrison turned swiftly, hopefully. She watched Steele lift his sombrero and finger the new bandage over that bullet cut he had got a few days ago. His blue-gray eyes were half closed, his lips pursed as he thought hard.

Slowly he readjusted his sombrero, hitched his trousers and gun-belt the reflective way he had. Then he met her eyes.

"A man could lose a nickel or a dime or a quarter about as easy as a penny. Let's look some more."

But after five minutes' search they knew no other coin had been dropped. Steele stood staring up at the west arm of the hills, again thinking deeply.

"You know, when Beacham and I had a scuffle in an alley shed that first night? You heard about it. Neither of us knew who the other was. I grabbed a concho off Jack, stuck it in my hatband—" He fingered the band around his sombrero. "I've lost it somewhere. But what I'm getting at is, that concho was copper."

Mona gasped. "And this penny—"

"Is copper. You don't think that Jack dropped it for a sign?"

They stared at each other. Steele broke the spell as he turned to his horse. Mona ran to hers, and a moment later they were retracing their way back through trail that ran through the tumble of high rocks.

Forty minutes later they were on a hillside at the beginning of the main street of Midasville. They sat their horses, gazing at the double row of empty, dilapi-

dated buildings that stretched up the incline and ended in green pines arrayed in the background. Steele turned to the girl.

"The tracks of those three hosses we saw back a ways prob'ly were one of Dave Meyer's searching parties."

"But they might have been made by Jefferson Black, Zastrow, and Lentner when they came to join Doc Crawford and—and Jack!"

"Well," Steele said, "we can look in the Miner's Tenstrike. Reckon if we haven't found anything after that, we're through, Mona."

"And it must be eleven o'clock," she said in a low tone.

He frowned. That meant but one hour remained before Doc Crawford's option expired. And that, in turn, probably would mean Jack Beacham murdered. The plotters would not want him to live on to fight them after they reopened the long-abandoned Kitty Mine twenty miles away in Bearpaw.

No, they would kill Beacham. They might even now be torturing him to force him to assign mining rights of the Bearpaw company to their Kitty Mine. But successful or not in that, they certainly would kill him.

Steele led by two yards as he and Mona walked their horses up the main street of Midasville. He sensed that the girl was suppressing shudders as she gazed at one blank, dust-grayed window after another, and saw the drunken tilt of the neglected buildings. But Steele was scarcely aware now of the atmosphere of ghostliness as he scrutinized every foot of ground for tracks of horses.

And he had found what he sought.

He said nothing to Mona, but his pulse quickened with sudden hope and apprehension. Staring at the stores, he saw no evidence of life. They had not found a single horse in the alley sheds, and they had searched them all.

Nevertheless there were fresh tracks in

the dust that his companion had not noticed. And horses *could* be lodged in one of these empty stores.

THE lean, cruel-looking man in the second story window across the street jerked back as Steel dismounted in front of the Miner's Tenstrike Saloon and faced him as he was speaking to Mona. Nick Zastrow fingered his carbine, his thin lips twitching. He felt a hand on his arm and started as he glared at Jefferson Black.

"They might have somebody following 'em. That Ranger's plenty shrewd. Better wait."

"We could cut 'em down! We agreed—"

"Never mind. Wait. We got plenty time!"

Zastrow twitched his shoulders restlessly. "I could pick Steele off easy, and you could get the girl. Ten to one they ain't with anybody!" he growled. "We can't afford to have that damned Ranger live to tell about this, Jeff!"

"He won't. But he's not fool enough to come with just a girl, I tell you. And I don't like shootin' him from so far off; he's too important to take any chances. I want him at close range.

"But I don't like the idea of killin' either of 'em," he added nervously.

"Huh, we got to! He's goin' in that saloon!" Zastrow breathed. He raised his carbine, snarled as Black suddenly gripped its barrel and jerked it aside.

"Come on, you fool! You signaled Doc they were comin' up the street! Come on—and before we get there you'll hear the ambush!"

On the street, Steele was picking his way through a break in the hitchrail, then waiting to assist Mona. He kept scanning the buildings opposite, then studying the entrance of the Miner's Tenstrike. He felt oddly disturbed and uneasy. But seeming to read no special alarm in Mona's face, told himself that the town actually was deserted.

"You wait here, Mona. I'll call after I'm in."

She agreed, and stood fingering her six-gun as she watched him go to the door of the Tenstrike and suddenly jerking it open, leap aside. Nothing happened.

He turned and grinned at her. Then confidently Steele stepped inside. He ducked as a bat which had been perched just above the door dove at him, disturbed and panic-stricken by the sudden shaft of light. It flew the length of the room and suddenly came swishing back. Steele ducked again, and kept watching until the animal found a new perch somewhere in the gloom of the rear of the musty-smelling saloon.

He went forward. The tables and chairs strewn the place in disorder were vacant. There was the table he had sat at to play that strange game of poker—

Steele whipped around, drawing. The top of a head rose above the crude plank bar and a gun snapped level.

THEIR shots were simultaneous, rocking the building with their deafening blast. The thickly dusted oval mirror behind the bar shattered into bits. Steele, diving toward protective darkness of the back, fired again. Then he felt something jab hard against his hip, and his blood seemed to go cold.

"Die if you move, Ranger!"

But he moved, whirling. And the gun roared, its fiery powder particles scorching the small of his back as they burned his clothing. Steele plunged forward, struck the floor littered with sawdust several years old. He managed to turn on his side, and glimpsing a man straightening with a smoking Colt in his fist, shot twice, swiftly.

It was Paul Lentner. His dark face changed as he lurched backward with the terrific impact of two bullets crushing his chest. He was dead before he struck the floor. And before the thud of his body came, Steele was twisting in reverse to

meet the first gunman who had fired across the bar.

The man rounded its end. It was Crawford, and his eyes were like pinpoints of metal glowing dully in the half-dark of the Miner's Tenstrike. Their guns spoke, but neither seemed to be harmed. Steele was on his feet now, swaying and in pain. He had counted three shots gone from his gun, knew three more remained. Only three to get out of here alive.

A scream from the street went knife-like to his heart. Response to it came in a choked, gurgling sound behind the bar.

They sent new fury into Steele. He shot as Doc Crawford fired the second time, and through the billowing, acrid smoke, thought the man wavered. The echoes of their gun-blasts were pierced by a sighing sound from Crawford. He must have reeled against a table, sent it crashing to the floor.

Steele hung on the bar. For a moment he could not move. His back felt torn open. But somehow he pulled himself to its nearest end, his eyes every moment riveted on the smoky cloud concealing Crawford. He just made the end when steps sounded both from front and back. Steele pitched himself at the form on the floor.



Jack Beacham was tightly gagged and bound. With one jerk Steele tore the gag open. His fingers worked feverishly at the triple knots of the lass used to hold Beacham helpless. His boots were off, Steele gathered hazily, and there were red glowing cigar butts near his bare feet on the floor. His supposition about torture had been only too correct,

"Flash! The back—I!"

Mona's cry ended in a gunshot. She moaned a little, gasped. He thought she was backing in the front door, shooting at someone on the sidewalk. He jerked erect, sure that Beacham could do the rest for himself. He was in time to spy Nick Zastrow stealing Indian-like out of the gloom at the rear of the place, his lips twitching, his eyes like beads over the carbine he was bringing to a level to shoot Mona from behind.

Steele's involuntary grunt notified Zastrow where he was. The man's eyes flared, and in that split-second the Ranger knew that Nick thought it was he who lay prostrate on the floor. It was, of course, Paul Lentner.

Steele rushed the length of the bar as Zastrow's carbine sounded. The Ranger proved closer than Zastrow thought, popping up with suddenness that made him yell out. The carbine clattered to the floor as Zastrow filled his two hands. Steele shot—and again, fiercely.

Nick doubled up as if clubbed. The Colts dripped from his hands. He was dead before he fell drunkenly into a chair, knocked it against another, and spilled in a limp heap with his head against the seat of the first.

Over the saloon fell a deep hush.

STEELE prowled out from the bar. His keen eyes sought to penetrate the slow-swirling fog of gunsmoke. The most dangerous of those four still was here, somewhere. Doc Crawford of the chill, rock-like eyes and hawk's nose; Doc Crawford who was a lightning killer like his name-sake, the famous Doc Halliday of the gun days of old Tombstone.

The Ranger couldn't locate Crawford. Again his blood seemed to grow cold in his veins. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. There was not a sound in the Tenstrike save for Mona's quick breathing as she crouched somewhere over near the front door. Then a rustling

noise and a soft grunt as Beacham tore off the last of his bonds.

But Crawford—

Steele moved toward the alley door, and by that daring movement located his man. By some freak of telepathy each rushed at the same instant, wanting freedom at his back. And, unexpectedly, their shoulders brushed.

Crawford snapped up his gun and shot. The blaze was across the Ranger's chest, the bullet wild. Crawford was on his right, and as Steele tried to jerk back to send home his last shot, the other grabbed his arm. The Colt throbbed, flinging its slug at the ceiling.

They went into a fierce grapple for Crawford's short-barreled weapon. Steele threw all his weight at the man, bore him backward. They struck a table. It slid away, tipped, went down with a crash. Crawford's left lifted the Ranger's jaw with a snap of knuckles on bone.

Groggily Steele threw himself forward again and clung, trying to shake the haze from his brain. He had a grip on Crawford's gun and twisting, seemed almost to wrench it loose. But they went harder together, chest to chest, and the weapon was flat between them.

Steele felt a knee graze his groin. Suddenly he let go the revolver, leaned back slightly, put his hundred and eighty pounds into a punch at the long, thin face hazily seen before him. And the blow landed with the force of a maul. Landed flush on Doc Crawford's lips.

His teeth gave way. He lurched with a snarl choked back in his throat. Steele leaped after him, bore him to the floor. Somehow Crawford managed to squeeze his trigger; then the gun was jerked out of his fingers. The older man raised his knees again but failing to throw Steele off, tried to turn over. A fist met his cheek. The muzzle of his own gun collided with his skull with a wooded sound.

Doc Crawford went limp, sighing thinly.

There were steps behind Steele. He

tried to raise himself and turn to battle a new foe. But he could only spill forward over Crawford, as limp as the unconscious man under him.

IT WAS an hour and a half before the smoke of a burning alley shed brought two of the searching parties into Midasville. One, headed by the ramrod-straight sheriff of Centerline, came clattering up the main street in a billow of dust. The other, three cowboys, one of whom was Dave Meyer, had a captive in bedraggled, dusty, cursing Jefferson Black. He was still panting with the effort of his threats and imprecations, but he was subdued now as he rode with both hands tied to his saddle horn—subdued in the manner of a dog after a whipping.

Mona Garrison ran into the street. "They're in the Tenstrike! Oh, Sheriff, I'm glad you came! And—why it's Dave Meyer!" she cried as the second group came riding up the street at full speed.

She guided them into the saloon. Flash Steele sat at a table near the dusty front window, his face grim as he yielded to Beacham's quick treatment of that wound and powder burn across the small of his back. He looked up as the tall, mustached sheriff clumped into the place, and managed a nod and grin of welcome.

"Just in time, Sheriff—er—"

"McKay. Glad to meet you, Steele. Sure glad! Heard plenty about you." As they shook hands he looked about the place. "That fellow dead, is he?"

"Paul Lentner, owns the XL outfit. Yes. You'll find another man toward the back. He's Nick Zastrow—or was. Both Mona and Jack here agree that he murdered Marshal Exley of Bearpaw.

"And over there near the bar," he added, pointing, "is a gent named Doc Crawford. Used to own and operate the Kitty Mine in Bearpaw some years ago? He used to own it," Steele repeated, "but Doc just sold it."

As they looked inquiring, Jack Beacham laughed.

"I just bought it from him for a thousand dollars. Doc seemed glad to have that much. He'd wanted forty thousand before, but just now he figured it mightn't sell at all. So he took a thousand to buy tobacco during his prison term. Why, he acted afraid I wouldn't pay that much!"

Mona stood looking at him, speechless with pride and happiness. She remembered something. "But Jack—the Bearpaw fund? The fifty-five thousand dollars?"

"All except Crawford's one thousand is sittin' there on the bar. Gosh!" he exclaimed, limping to the nearest chair. "My feet sure hurt. Anybody got any sort of clean grease? They burned me with cigar stubs, Sheriff, wantin' me to sign over mineral rights under Bearpaw. Of course, I couldn't do that. Why, every man, woman, and child in town figures to be rich. And thanks to Flash Steele," he added, "they *are* goin' to be rich!"

Sheriff McKay tipped his sombrero back. Remembering, he dug inside his vest and brought out a folded envelope which he flattened and offered to Flash Steele.

"This here's for you. I see it's from the state capital, office of the Governor. Been waitin' at general delivery over in Centerline for two-three days. Postmaster happened to see me saddle up to come here, so he gave it to me to deliver."

Steele regarded the envelope, grinned slowly, and tucked it in his torn shirt pocket.

"I'll read it," he told the watchers, "later on. It'll be a job of some sort Big Jim's got in mind—you can rely on that. But pshaw, this ghost town-Bearpaw mix-up has been kind of tiring, and I ought to get some rest before I've got to ride somewhere to look into some more underhand work. Hadn't I? Don't even a Ranger deserve one day off?"

THE CINDER MUTT

By CLIFFORD KNIGHT

Author of *"The Ghost Comes Back,"*
"The Cannonball Express," etc.

THE HOT-SHOT was waiting for the block when the Brains kicked back in his chair. "I'm getting me a dog next week—" he started to say.

"A dog? What for?" asked Bill the Boomer from his perch in the cupola of the caboose.

"What does any man want a dog for?" The Brains rolled a cigarette. "I think I'll get me a good bird dog. And keep him at home. It's the only place for him—"

"Oh, I don't know."

"It's a cinch I won't make a railroad dog of him."

"You never heard of the Cinder Mutt, did you, Skipper?" asked Bill the Boomer. The Skipper was one of the home-guard, while Bill was a rolling stone who never had gathered any moss on the many railroads he had worked for.



Some of the Railroaders Stood Out that the Cinder Mutt Was a Cross Between a Buzz Saw and a Wild Cat

"Never heard of him—or it—"

"Him," said Boomer Bill. "Out on the California Central. He was a dog that was a dog. I never seen none better."

"What kind of a dog was he?"

"Nobody never knowed," said Bill. "We used to git into arguments about the Cinder Mutt's ancestry. Some of us stood out that he was a cross between a buzz saw and a wild cat, and some of the others



was sure he had more dynamite in him than anything else. I used to look at him and try to make out whether it was Airedale, bull terrier, husky dog or wolf that he favored most, but one thing is certain, he wasn't no hairy sleeve bound with a soprano yap, but Chick Wirtheimer who owned him first, picked him up as a pup in San Pedro from a sailor, and he took to the railroad like he'd been born on the right of way.

It's kinda hard to know where to begin to tell you about the Cinder Mutt. You know, that damned dog made a trip all by hisself clean from California to Boston and back, riding with the express messengers. He had the tags to show it on his collar. He'd start out like that whenever he felt like it. Maybe go to Seattle or Galveston, but he'd always come back to the California Central. It was the home road for him. He'd been in more fights and killed more dogs than any other dog I've seen, and he didn't have many scars on him neither.

"Yeah, a dog like that ain't worth powder and shot to kill him," said the Brains.

"Oh, I don't know now, Skipper. You didn't know the Cinder Mutt," said Bill. He went on:

"The Cinder Mutt wore a silver plate on his collar that was a life pass for him on the California Central. That showed what the brass hats thought of him. But I was thinkin' just now of the time the movies tried to make a movin' picture on the C.C. with a dog they had. It wasn't Rin-tin-tin or Strongheart, but some dog they called Chu-chow-chow."

I caught the call down in Jimmy Doolin's pool hall where I usually hang out. "What's it for, kid?" I asks the caller. "A moom picture special," he says. I don't want to go, but calls was scarce them days. "Well," I says, signin' the book, "I'll take one more chanct, but the law of averages is gonna get me some day if I keep on with these movie specials."

It's a short call and I find the train

made up when I get to the yards. It was the first time I ever seen a picture company ready to go when they said they'd be, and which there ain't a lot of unimportant guys runnin' around yellin' orders.

"Who is the star?" I asks Pat Hinds who is to be the Skipper.

"Chu-chow-chow, or something like that."

"Who's he, a Chinaman? I never heard of no Chink movie star."

"No, he ain't a Chinaman. He's a dog."

"Gonna be a dog opera, is it, Pat?" I says sarcastic, and just then Chu-chow-chow comes up. They brung him in a limousine with a Jap chauffeur and when they stopped, out got the owner and a trainer and a veterinary, and then the dog. He wasn't such a bad dog to look at, but they rush him into the Pullman and put him in a drawin' room and the vet gives him the once over to make sure he ain't strained nothin' on his ride to the train.

I think I've told you, Skipper, that the California Central is the railroad that's gone Hollywood. They got more and better scenery than any other railroad on the coast, and lots of movies has been made on their right of way. Well, it seems we are out to make a picture of the great north woods. We get to talkin' to a little bald-headed fellow with a derby hat on the train whose name is Goldsmith, and who is the financial giant what is producing the picture. He is telling us what the story is to be about.

It seems that a dog has run off into the woods and gone wild. She has mated with a wolf and one day the telegraph operator at a station called Lodgepole up in the woods finds a little pup that is lost and it is the pup of this here dog and the wolf. He takes it back to his depot where he lives in the upper story, and raises the pup to be a dog. The ops whose name is Barton Merryhew, and the dog who he has called Prince, become fast friends. One

day Merryhew and the dog are two miles from the depot when Merryhew breaks a leg. He knows a freight train is due to pass soon and he sends Prince to flag it and bring the train crew to his aid. The crew takes the ops to the company hospital two stations down the line.

THERE is a French Canuck trapper in the country named Jules Beaubien. But while his leg was broke Merryhew fell in love with his nurse, a little yellow-headed gal. She has been Jules' honey. He threatens to kill Merryhew and then one night after the ops is back on the job, Jules comes in masked and holds up Merryhew and ties and gags him. He has locked Prince outside in a shed, and is getting ready to hold up the Limited.

Well, it looks like he is all to the good. The train will be wrecked and the trapper will rob the treasure on the train. But he hasn't counted on Prince. Prince busts out of the shed, rushes into the depot, takes one jump at Jules and knocks him down so that his head hits a table and busts his skull. Prince chews Merryhew's bonds off his wrists, then he grabs up a red lantern by the bale in his mouth and starts runnin' swiftly down the track and flags the train and saves the passengers and the treasure.

"That's all a dam bunch of hooey," I says to Goldsmith with the derby hat who is tellin' us the story as we ride up the line. "In fact," I says, "it's so rotten it smells."

"You should tell me that," he says, "and are you a story writer that knows how to write?"

"No," I says, "I'm a brakeman that's got sense enough to know they ain't no dog that would do what your Prince is supposed to do."

"Is that so?" says he, gettin' mad.

"Yes, that's so. Why, we got a dog on this railroad we call the Cinder Mutt and he's got sense enough to know that it's a bum story. He's a smart dog, but he

thinks like a dog thinks, and not like a bum story writer tries to make you think a dog thinks."

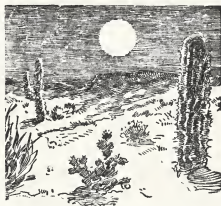
"Can it, Bill; you'll get his blood pressure up and he'll blow a cylinder head," says Pat Hinds in my ear. "What do you care what kind of a moom picture they make? 'Tain't no skin off of our anatomies what they do with their money."

"I'd like to see this dog you're tellin' about," says Goldsmith.

"You will," I says. "He's ridin' on the engine now."

"Chu-chow-chow will show him up for the cur he probably is," he says nasty-like. "Chu-chow-chow is all but human, gentlemen. You wait. I'll show you something that will make you marvel and say can such things be."

Well, we don't have long to wait before we gets up to Tamarack where the scenery makes you think you are brakin' on the C.P.R. somewheres up in Canada. The Cinder Mutt has been on the engine. He unloads and picks him out a nice spot in



the sun and goes to sleep. Goldsmith sees him and gives him one look and says to me:

"I thought you was talkin' about a dog."

"That's him," I says.

"Who should be interested in him, except a flea?" says Goldsmith. "With Chu-chow-chow now it is different. If a dog could have divorces he could make the

front page as often as some of our movie gals do."

Just then Chu-chow-chow comes along. He is just a good lookin' collie dog actin' like a kid out of school. But the old Cinder Mutt just opens one eye and gives him the once over and goes to sleep.

THERE'S a lot of work gettin' strung out with the cameras and reflectors, and pickin' out the spot where Chu-chow-chow is goin' to act. But after a while they start. You have to give the movie dog credit for doin' what they tell him, he seems like he knows everything you say to him. But so far as I am concerned all any dog needs to know is how to set up and to shake hands. Because a dog's a dog and not a man.

They start makin' the picture in the middle. The sun is right to take the scene where Chu-chow-chow stops the freight train to get the crew to come help Merryhew who has broke his leg, so they start to do that first. There's half a dozen box cars on the side track at Tamarack and we pick them up after we've set out the Pullman and the baggage car, and play we are the freight train. Old Sam Bean is the hoghead and the director has him run up and down the track a few times to make sure they are all set on their camera angles, and they have Chu-chow-chow doin' his stuff. Which is the dog comes bounding out of the forest and onto the track to flag the train.

Believe it or not, they are goin' to have the dog flag the train by pickin' up a stick and kinda twistin' his neck sideways to make it look like he is wavin' a stop signal.

I says to Sam Bean where everybody could hear me, "Sam," I says, "if you was runnin' along through here and a sure enough dog in real life was to jump out at you wavin' a stick, would you know you was bein' signalled to stop?"

"Hell, no," says Sam. "I'd keep goin'."

"That trick won't do, then," Goldsmith

says to his director, whose name is Basil Atwater.

"How are we gonna do it, then?" says Atwater. "I'm doin' what it says in the script. The story is rotten."

"Is a thing rotten," yells Goldsmith, "which cost me fifteen hundred dollars? It has to be good."

"Listen," I says, buttin' in. "Why don't you have the dog come bringin' a cap the man with the broke leg has been wearin'? A cap that the trainmen all reckonize because it is goofy lookin', and he has been kidded about it. The dog comes out with the cap and stands on the track. He puts the cap down and barks and picks it up again and runs a little ways back into the woods and puts it down and barks, and keeps on doin' that till he is almost run over because the engine is so close. That way it would mean somethin' which wavin' a stick don't. Ain't that so, Sam?"

Sam Bean scratches his head and says, "Well, I'd come nearer stoppin' for that then I would the stick."

WELL, Goldy and Basil Atwater go into a huddle and they decide to do it that way, and Pat Hinds get me to one side and says: "Listen, Bill, you want to go easy on this stuff. You've showed originality and now you're a marked man. They may hire you for a thousand a week to write stories in Hollywood."

Pat is kiddin' of course, and we set down and watch them make this scene. They do it six times before they think they got it right, and all the time the Cinder Mutt sleeps and stretches out comfortable in the sun. He ain't even interested by the barkin' of Chu-chow-chow who is workin' hard makin' the picture.

But after a while the Mutt wakes up and gets on his feet and stretches and shakes himself. He sees Chu-chow-chow waggin' his tail like he didn't have a care in the world. He lowers his head and starts like a shot and the first thing any-

body knows he hits Chu-chow-chow broadside and they roll over in the dust, and of all the barkin' and yelpin'. It was like a riot at the dog pound. But 'tain't a fight. The Cinder Mutt just wants to play. They are on their feet smellin' each other over, and then the Cinder Mutt flops on his forefeet like a dog will and feints like he is goin' to dodge, and Chu-chow-chow does the same. Then they are off like a streak into the woods.

But meantime the owner of Chu-chow-chow and the trainer and the veterinary, as well as Goldy and Basil Atwater, all come to life. It took 'em by surprise, and before they could get into action, except for beginnin' to cuss, which they do plenty, they begin to call and run after them, but them two dogs is gone.

Pat Hinds shakes his head. He says to me confidential, because there is always movie people around to hear. "Boy, I thought the Mutt was aimin' to kill that dog. How'd he happen to be along, anyway? He ain't got any business up here in this crowd."

"Search me, Pat," I says. "I didn't know he was with us till I seen him on the engine back at San Marino. Sam Bean must of let him ride."

"We'd better lock him up when he gets back. If he killed that dog we'd all lose our jobs."

"You mean iffen he gets back," I says.

That was the idea that Goldy and the others had, too. But it is an hour before they come stragglin' back to the depot at Tamarack. They been runnin' all through them woods tryin' to run down them two dogs and ain't even caught sight of 'em once. Goldy is madder than the rest and has blood in his eye.

"Why should I let the cur live, I ask you?" he kep' hollerin'. "I want that you should shoot the flea-bite, Basil," he says to the director.

"No, you don't," I says. "That dog's got as much right to live as you have. You kill him and see what happens to one

half-pint size movie producer." I git mad too when they come talkin' like that about good old Cinder Mutt.

"But the expense," he hollers, holdin' up his hands. "The expense! He is costin' me money! I shall telegraph the president." He starts toward the depot. "I don't have to stand it. The company will pay me for my lost time on account of their dog."

JUST then up comes the Cinder Mutt and Chu-chow-chow. They look like they have been places, especially Chu-chow-chow. You could see it was the first chance that movie dog had ever had just to be a dog. He'd had a good time, even if he did have burrs in his hair and a porcupine quill stickin' in his cheek. When the owner and the vet seen that, you'd thought they'd been murdered the way they hollered. Or maybe a traffic accident had happened in the heart of downtown with all the runnin' for the first aid and screechin' and suggestions. But they soon had the quill out and the cut doctored. And then the vet orders Chu-chow-chow to bed to get some rest.

"Money, money, money! A dog should have to go to bed and it is costing me plenty; it is bankrupting me," yells Goldy.

"Better take the Cinder Mutt over to the train and lock him up somewheres," Pat says to me. "It's a wonder he ain't already tore the seat of somebody's pants out." Pat was referrin' to a trick which Charlie Patton, a tallowpot, had taught the Cinder Mutt, and which the dog done if he didn't like a man. It sure kept everybody that knowed about it tryin' to be nice to the Cinder Mutt. So I takes him over and puts him in the baggage car. I do it, so's everybody could see what I am doin'. But I knowed it wouldn't be long before the Cinder Mutt would be out again, which he was.

Well, there ain't anything stirrin' for a little while, then Pat Hinds looks at his watch and says, "Better see that Sam

Bean's in the hole, Bill. It's time to clear the main for Twenty-five." Just then we hear Number 25 whistle, but she's a long ways off yet.

I starts over to make sure Sam is in the hole and that the switch is lined proper. And there is the Cinder Mutt settin' down in the shade under the Pullman.

He's got out somehow and is takin' life easy again. Same is in the clear and everything is OK for Twenty-five, which is whistlin' again. And I start for the depot. Just then I hear a crash, and a lot of hollerin'. I look back to where there's a little gold mine right beside the right of way, which is gettin' out quite a lot of rock. The guys have a dump car and they run the rock out in this dump car on a little track they have. Well, the thing has got away from the guy who's riding it, and she jumps the track and heads for one of our telegraph poles. The dump car loaded, I guess, weighs maybe five hundred pounds and she gets up speed and then jumps and lands against the pole. And then ping! ping! pang! pung! Of all the wires snappin' I never heard the beat of it. It was just what Pat and I had said would happen some day.

I walks pretty snappy now toward the telegraph office, even though I could of known the ops and Pat, who is there by now, knows what has happened. As I get to the door the regular operator, whose name is Bert Smith, comes out with Pat. And Bert is sayin' to Pat:

"The dispatcher had just called me on the phone and was just startin' to say something. He was excited. His voice sounded funny. And Harry James is one dispatcher that don't get excited like that for nothing. I figure something is wrong, and am wonderin' what it is. And then the wire goes dead. They're all dead."

"Sure, they're all dead," I says, comin' up. "That dump car jumped the track and knocked them all out."

"What do you think Harry James wanted to tell you?" asks Pat.

"I don't know," answers Bert. "I'm gonna go to the ranger station over here in the woods and telephone down to Headersville and tell 'em just what's happened. We'll need a crew of linemen to get them wires repaired."

"Come on," I says, "I'll go with you." And Pat comes along too. We ain't gone far until the Cinder Mutt is right at our heels. He has seen us start and he has decided to go with us. Twenty-five is whistlin' a little closer. It is Chick Wirtheimer who is the hoghead, which I spoke about as having got the Cinder Mutt as a pup from a sailor at San Pedro, and raised him. The Mutt is still fonder of Chick than anybody else on the line, and they ain't nobody else that blows the whistle like Chick does. Everybody on the line knowed his peculiar whistle, even the Cinder Mutt.

WE WALK along in a hurry, and it ain't more than about two hundred yards to the forest ranger station which has a telephone line of its own down to Headersville. Just then we hear another train whistle from the opposite direction. It is farther off than Twenty-five is now. When we get close enough to the ranger station which is a lookout where the ranger is supposed to set all day lookin' out over the national forest to spot forest fires, we hear his telephone ring. We see him get up from his easy chair and go inside. In a minute he busts outside and sets up a holler and waves for us to come runnin'. Which we do, for something is wrong.

"What's the matter, Mike?" Bert Smith says, as we come up.

"You got a wreck goin' to happen," he yells. "Unless you can stop Twenty-five!"

Well, I'll give you one guess, Skipper, whether or not we was knocked cuckoo by that. We couldn't believe our

ears for a second. Then Mike, the ranger, says to Bert:

"My God, Bert, don't you understand? Twenty-five's comin'. I hear 'em. Go stop 'em!"

Well, it needed just that to start us runnin'. I never was so scared before at anything. Just to have it come like that. Here it was plain daylight and no reason in the world why we couldn't any one of us have stopped Twenty-five, which is close now and comin' to beat hell, except that we wasn't over where Chick Wirtheimer could see us wave a signal. There is trees in between us, a heavy growth of timber. I ain't ever run so hard before. Our feet was poundin' on the ground like we was runaway fire horses. And ahead of us the Cinder Mutt is lopin' along easy. He barked a couple of times thinkin', I guess, that we was playin' a game.

"I know now what Harry James wanted," says Bert Smith, gaspin'-like to us. After it was all over, of course, we knowed just what had happened, but then all we could do was guess. The operator up the line at Crestway, it seems, had overlooked a order he should of given to Twenty-five, makin' a meet at Tamarack between Twenty-five and a special that's comin' from the other direction. And of course Bert Smith who didn't have anything to stop Twenty-five for, had give 'em a clear board, and Chick Wirtheimer was runnin' like hell as he always does on this stretch of track. Harry James had caught the mistake just in time to warn Bert Smith, and was startin' to tell it to him on the phone when them wires was all busted to hell. It sure showed what Harry James used for brains, though; he called the ranger on the one chance in a million that the ranger could get word to us in time. But there we was two hundred yards or more from the track and Twenty-five comin' now like a bat out of hell.

Thinkin' of these things made us all three run faster than any sprinter ever run

in the Olympics. We just had to stop Twenty-five. First Pat Hinds would inch past me, and then I'd catch up and inch past him. Bert Smith had put on extra speed and got about five feet ahead of us. All three of us is doin' our best.

"We can't yell to no movin' picture blankety blank to stop 'em, can we, Pat?" I says, gaspin', because I am gettin' short-winded.

"No use—" says Pat. "They're—dumb."

WE RUNS on. Old Chick Wirtheimer cuts loose his peculiar whistle and it sounds like he is right there in the woods by the depot.

"If we could run as fast as Cinder—Mut—" I gasps. 'Tain't no use, though. Bert Smith starts in to holler, then. He hollers to the Cinder Mutt. He says:

"Get 'im, Mutt! Take 'im! Take Chick!"

Well I ain't expectin' you to believe me, Skipper. But that damned dog seemed like he begin to understand what the trouble is. If anybody could read a rail-roader's mind that dog could. It seems he knows Chick has got to be stopped. Because he just kinda laid down lower to the ground and just left us like we was



tied to a post. Pat and I let out a yell to encourage him. And the Cinder Mutt begins to bark. He's headin' straight for the track which we could see down the path. We have been runnin' good, but not fast enough. Twenty-five is right on top the station almost. We are too far away to do any good at all, but we don't stop. We

was like a good ball player; we are runnin' it out to first even though we can't make it.

But how is the Cinder Mutt gonna do anything? I kep' thinkin'. He can't wave no stop signal. He ain't got no goofy lookin' cap of Bert Smith's to play with like Chu-chow-chow, because Bert don't wear none; he ain't got nothin' at all to help him. Thinkin' of these things was enough to make us give up. We was beat before we started.

Just the same we kep' yellin' at old Cinder Mutt to take him. There is some actors hangin' around, and they hear us hollerin'. We could see them through the trees. Kinda enquirin' like, lookin' our way, and even walkin' toward us like me might be up to somethin' they miss out on. Pat yells to 'em, "Stop that train! Stop that train!" But 'tain't no use. They are dumb. They wouldn't know how to stop Twenty-five even if they had rehearsed it.

We could see Twenty-five through the trees now. She is right at the switch. You know how these highwheel babies run, Skipper, now that everything's gone streamlined. When they're goin' their best, how they seem to lay their ears back and flatten out close to the ground. Well, that's the way Chick Wirtheimer is runnin'.

AND as far as that's concerned they ain't nobody got nothin' on the Cinder Mutt, either. Maybe there's dogs that have run faster, but I don't think so. He's movin' like a shadow through the trees; like somethin' you're not sure you even see. But straight toward the track. What can he do, though? There ain't a thing he can do even though he knowed we wanted Chick to stop. But he's a even better ball player than we are, though. He ain't quittin' till he's touched first base.

We was close enough to see what happens. We're wavin' our arms in a stop signal and hollerin', but we're still back among the trees, and can't expect Chick Wirtheimer to see or hear us. We seen

the Cinder Mutt shoot out from the trees onto the right of way, just as Chick flashes past. The dog turns like a streak and is runnin' alongside the engine. Yelpin' and snappin' at the wheels. Nobody'd ever seen him do that before. He has got more sense. Only now it seems he don't care.

We see Chick Wirtheimer notice the Cinder Mutt. He leans out of the cab window and looks down, and then back along the train as the dog is left behind. Because there ain't no livin' thing can run as fast as Twenty-five is runnin'. Then somethin' hits the Cinder Mutt. Maybe he jumped too high and a step hit him or a journal box got him, and he went rollin'. Limp as a dish rag; over and over. It seemed like he wasn't never gonna stop rollin' in the dust. And then he laid still. The next we realized Twenty-five was gone. She went around the curve and that's the last we seen of her.

She was gone plumb to hell!

"Well," said Pat Hinds, settin' down on a pile of ties, and holdin' his head in his hands. "We done our best."

"You mean the Mutt done his best," I says.

"I guess you're right, Bill," says Pat. "He done more than we did. He's give his life."

Goldy and Atwater and some of the others come up then and asked what was the matter.

"Matter," says Bert Smith, gettin' hard, and I thought he was gonna hit Goldy. "Matter? You just seen the best dog story that could ever happen acted out in real life. Matter? Why, you damned dumbbells," and there was tears runnin' down Bert's cheeks. "Matter? That train has gone to hell! Listen! Listen to him go! Just hear him! And there's another train comin' toward him just as fast. And they're gonna meet head on down there in the woods!"

Nobody said a word. We just listened to the sound of Chick Wirtheimer fadin' away toward hell.

All of a sudden Pat Hinds yells to me, "Get Sam Bean! We'll follow 'em." We are both runnin' now toward the engine. We can't catch Twenty-five, of course, but we can be on the scene as soon as we can and maybe be some help. Sam gets the engine out on the main, and yanks her wide open and we start after Twenty-five. We ain't gone a mile from the depot, though, before Sam wipes the clock and sets us all on our necks. He puts her in reverse, and the old drivers spin tryin' to get the hell out of the way. Because here is Twenty-five backin' up. We'd almost slammed into her tail end, before we got stopped.

"That's funny," says Pat. "He's comin' back. There ain't no wreck—yet. Don't let him run over you, Sam," he yells to the hoghead.

"What's made him stop and come back?" I says.

"Search me, Bill. We'll ask Chick when we get back to Tamarack."

Which we did, holdin' a huddle on the depot platform and talkin' the thing out. I noticed when we got off at the depot, that Bert Smith had carried the Cinder Mutt up and laid him out on his coat in the shade. But the dog ain't dead. He had just got a big cut over one eye, is all. The vet which takes care of the movie dog has looked him over and said he probably is O.K.

The special is showing up now, and we says to Chick: "How'd you come to stop and back up?"

CHICK just turned and pointed to the Cinder Mutt which he had already examined to see if he is all right before he'd done another thing. "The Mutt stopped me," he says, kinda swallowin'. "I got to thinkin' there was something wrong with him actin' that way. He never done it before. I trained him not to bark

at no trains. I knowed he had a reason or he wouldn't of done it. And then on top of that I'd seen out of the tail of my eye some guys back in among the trees wavin' their arms. I didn't reckonize anybody, but somehow when I got to thinkin' about the Mutt doin' what he done, and these guys wavin', I got a hunch things were wrong, and I come back. Are you sure that dog's gonna be all right?" he asks the vet.

"I'm reasonably certain, yes. Of course, it's no great loss"—and the vet kinda shrugs his shoulders. That's as far as he got. Chick's arm went back, and if I hadn't grabbed him it would have smashed that vet clean through the depot wall.

The special is headin' in on the side track, and Chick's conductor, Ed Wilkinson, was tryin' to get Chick started again. Just then the Cinder Mutt kinda stretched and sighed, then sat up and got to his feet. He was a little shaky on his legs, though. The boys just ganged him, especially Chick, to touch his side, and pat him a little, and tell him he was a damn good dog.

"Let's get out of town, Chick," yelled Ed Wilkinson, and Chick run for his engine. We all kinda separated to get doin' what we'd been doin' when the excitement begun, and that left the platform open like. Chick cracked the throttle and his old engine coughed. I seen the Mutt take one look at Twenty-five as she began to roll, and then he started for the cab, runnin' as though nothin' is wrong with him. But Goldsmith is in his way. Maybe he ain't exactly in the way, either. Come to think of it the Cinder Mutt went out of his way just a little. He makes one swipe at Goldy as he passes and tears the whole seat of his pants off, and then leaps onto the cab steps and climbs up into the gangway, the fireman helpin' him, still holdin' the cloth of Goldy's pants in his mouth.



*Who'd Have Thought that
"Sugar" Would Become a
Fightin' Word?*

BAT JENNISON, SIX-GUN PROFESSOR

By **GEORGE BRUCE
MARQUIS**

*Author of "That Camp Ananias,"
"Half Way to Hardpan," etc.*

WITHOUT haste Bat Jennison set down his glass and turned to look across the barroom. The voice of a stranger had assailed his ears, a young voice—angry, defiant, brimful of insolence and the will to instant battle. This is what Jennison had heard. "No squint-eyed fossil from the days of Daniel Boone can talk that way to me and get away with it. It's *your* ante! I'll cover your bets!"

Fighting words indeed and yet no instant crash of guns came tripping on their heels, at which Jennison had wondered mildly even as he swung to face the orator. Then as he noted the challenged man, wonder vanished. He was simply baiting the roaring youngster to sure destruction. Squint Oddie would take his time, that was his method and his joy, yet death would follow the tantalizing wait. For Oddie was a superb gunman—crafty, cold and merciless. If the young man was to be saved Jennison must act. So with a

regretful glance at his half-emptied glass nested more or less securely on the sloppy bar, Jennison advanced upon the pair.

"No play, Oddie!" he called out crisply. "All bets is off."

Oddie's somber black eyes glowered under his bushy gray brows, yet his answer was peaceable enough. A simple nod of his shaggy head and one curt sentence:

"I hadn't even called for cards."

Standing between them now, Jennison turned to inspect the truculent stranger. Young, even more youthful than his voice had indicated, yet his attitude did not run counter to his bold words. A youngster with a reputation so Jennison appraised him, or more likely just a brave lad who could not be intimidated. However, he would give this boy some solid advice for his general health. But not before the crowd. Rather he addressed a word to Whispering Thompson, his giant companion.

"Whisperin'," he directed, "parade that

brash youngen over to a private bench or some place similar. I want to fan his ears with wisdom words in a minute or so."

Thompson, two hundred-fifty pounds of muscle and cheerful good will, simply tucked the belligerent under a mighty arm and bore him away from present harm. Carrier and wriggling freight once moving, Jennison turned and looked long and hard at Squint Oddie.

"When did you arrive back here?" he questioned.

"Today," Oddie answered briefly. A moment's pause and he snarled, "The ten days I've been gone ain't subtracted none from my hate for you, Bat Jennison. I only wish I was good enough with a six-gun to send you where you belong."

"Meanin' heaven likely," Jennison analyzed carelessly. "She's sad your cannonadin' powers don't stretch up to your hate since you take it so hard." Now in a very different tone he added, "Even so, don't forget that the decent men in this camp loaned you a pat warning before you lift. Your cold blooded murders which you named fair battles was to leave off."

"I ain't forgot," Oddie assented bitterly, "not by a long damned shot. Still I ain't going to stand around idle while some briggilty young squirt mows me down for his glory. That's what was in the making just now."

JENNISON, as fair minded a man as ever lived, reacted instantly to the problem involved in Oddie's statement.

"Nobody would blame you," he admitted, "should the facts track with what you jest hinted. Unlimber 'em further."

"It was about like this," Oddie explained in mollified tones. "I was shifting my stand when this young hellion who I'd never seen before got his toes tramped on. I figger he slid his foot under mine deliberate, only I can't absolutely sware to it. Anyway I apologized like a man ought

to, but that apparently wasn't what he was after. He stuck his nose in my face and told me that if I'd shag off my eyebrows I could see where I was going. Well, that made me mad and I told him that he'd best be dry behind the ears before he went out of his way to pick fights with men. And I reckon you heard the rest. My opinion is he's a young cock who needs his comb trimmed."

"You're mebby right," Jennison nodded thoughtfully. "Yep, you're probable right. I'll labor with him about his manners."

Jennison loathed bullies, and he entertained a healthy disgust toward men who forced battles on others. If Oddie's tale were true the youngster fitted the category, misguided as he had been concerning eventual results. That he had picked on the wrong man mitigated not at all the stranger's offense, according to Jennison's iron clad thinking. That he would tell him was like stating an axiom.

He found the young man scuffling his feet in sullen silence on a bench between Jennison's two comrades, the giant Thompson and Doc Levitt, a learned but peremially inebriated medico. Jennison's address was frosty and decidedly to the point.

"Been measured recent fur a wooden overcoat?" he asked crisply. "If you ain't you'd best be and that rapid. Didoes like you've jest cut 'ill button you inside one in a damned fast hurry."

"He stepped on my foot," the other grumbled lame defense. But Jennison cut him off.

"Sure he so did," he said witheringly, "since you slid your hoof under his sole, and him not lookin'. Nope, you're tale's got spavins and ring-bone, likewise the bots." He looked at the silent youngster keenly.

The plain facts is," he continued coldly, "that you pushed the war onto Oddie. As she stands it ain't to your credit none, besides bein' damned pore judgment on your part accordin' to my guess. Fur

unless you're a top notch cannonader, your push would a ended damned sudden fur you, Oddie bein' rated one of the best. What's the real answer to the rebus?"

"Because I've got to learn to fight," the young man asserted without apologies, "and you can't learn any other way."

"Says you so!" Jennison countered sternly. "Got to learn to fight! Well, let me whisper you something. You'd never git through your A-B-C's with a man like Oddie. Your eddication 'ud be splintered off too damned quick fur that. And whilst we're talking, what's the notion about hafta learnin' to fight? Thar's a lot higher medals to reach fur let me tell you. Half the men in this camp don't even own a gun, and thar ain't a fourth who carries one. That's a fact to treasure up."



"The bibulous truth," Whispering Thompson corroborated in a cavernous way. "Only in your case it's a different tale. 'Your guns has always been enrolled—'"

"Thar ain't no exceptions at this late date," Jennison swept the defense to-be hurriedly aside. "I learned and you did, too, Whisperin', when it was that or a swift chute into life everlastin'. But this youngster don't hafta. Times is different."

DOC LEAVITT, the placid waters of memory stirred gently by Jennison's words, interposed a dreamy quotation:

"Charge on the foe. What glory can surpass dying?" Yet, he added pensively,

"living also has its sweet and tender moments."

"I know all that," the other nodded sadly, "anyway, the last part. And the other ain't no fun. I got a bullet through my right shoulder and I got one rib cut square off but I've got to keep on. I've got to learn to be a gunman."

"Why?" Jennison insisted practically.

"Because I've got to get good enough to kill a man," the youngster blurted out. "He shot my dad!"

"That's a high reason," and Jennison wavered. "Tell us about it. First though, let's interduce ourselves. This is Mr. Thompson and this is Doc Levitt. My name peg's Bat Jennison."

The young man's eyes widened as he caught that magical name. "Bat Jennison!" he goggled. "Hell, but I'm proud and glad to meet you. And you two others also," he added hastily. Now he turned to gaze in rapt wonder at the peerless gunman. "What I ain't heard about you, Mr. Jennison! And to think I've actually shook hands with you. I'm Frank Samuels, come out four months ago from Ioway to—" he hesitated, swallowed hard, then lapsed into silence. Jennison laid an understanding hand on the boy's shoulder.

"We're friends of yours, Frank," he said kindly. "What you say is said to us three and no others."

Samuels looked up, drew a deep breath, then picked up the wretched thread of his sad story.

"Dad come out to the mines," he began, "leaving me and mother back home in Ioway. He done well, sent us considerable money, you understand. Well, about five months ago we got a letter from a man, let me see, named Dan Duncan, at Rimrock. He told us how dad had got killed. Mother wasn't well anyway, and the shock put her in her grave. As soon as I could straighten things up I came out to Rimrock, but the murderer had left. I call him a murderer because while it looked like he give dad an even break;

he didn't. Dad wasn't no gun fighter, while the other man was. Since then I've been looking for him and I've been trying to learn how to fight while looking."

"You ain't yit named the murderer," Jennison suggested.

"Sweet Sugar Smith."

"Sweet Sugar Smith!" Whispering Thompson rumbled. "Say, you're picking out a tough bird, my boy. Them that know say he's one of the best."

"And whilst young, a killer per choice," Jennison continued the damning catalogue, "who enjoys the sight of seein' shot men kickin' around in their blood. I ain't never met him and I ain't never been to Rimrock, though it ain't more'n a hundred miles from here. Which rises a pint. Frank, I'm doubtin' if you can ever git good enough to tackle Smith. Accordin' to repute he is some hell on a greased skid with a six-gun."

"You say he's good," Samuels spoke up. "Know anything else about him that might help me?"

"Not much," Jennison answered. "I know his tallest swear word is 'Sweet Sugar's,' that he's young, and left handed. As I done said, I've never met him."

"Well," Samuels smiled eagerly, "I'm even with him in one spot. I'm left handed myself."

"She ain't enough, Frank," and Jennison shook his head. "Smith is a organized cannonader, trained for years. Besides he's one of them nachrul gunners. Training can help any man some, but the nachrul kind has speed and aim as a gift. You come from a farm four months ago, so you tells us. Smith has been a killer fur that many years anyway. Nope, Frank, bitter physic as it is to take, you'd best sponge Smith offen your hate slate. Totherwise, there's like to be two Samuel's notches dentin' the handle of his six-gun stead of one."

"No," the youngster maintained stoutly, "I've set this as my stint and I'm going

through with it. If he kills me, he does—that's all. It won't make much difference anyway. I'm the last of our family. Besides," he said bravely, "I ain't so poor as you might figure me. I've got a gift for it, men tell me. All I need is a little more practice or something. Anyway, I'll take my chances when our trails cross."

WHISPERING THOMPSON now broke in impetuously.

"Bat," he suggested, "why couldn't you take the youngster on for a little training? If you'd learn him a tenth you know, he'd be fit to meet Smith and another one like him at the same time."

Samuels looked hopefully at the famous gunsman.

"That would be awful good of you, Mr. Jennison," he said wistfully, "though it's a lot more than I could expect, I know."

Jennison, leagues removed from a showman, was on his way to a swift side step when he glanced at the young man. Mirrored in the boyish face was hope and a boundless faith in the miracle to be if Jennison would only become his mentor.

"All right," he capitulated, "I'll take you on, though she's like I'll learn more'n you will. Young left handed gunners like you are generally purty tough customers."

Now Jennison's public displays of skill were made only under the stress of stern necessity. He arranged his pedagogical labors accordingly. With Levitt and Thompson he met young Samuels the following morning at a secluded spot a half mile removed from the nearest cabin. The popping of pistols would likely attract no attention unless the projected meeting was advertised and to avoid this he had sworn young Samuels to secrecy. Once embarked on a rather distasteful task, Jennison proceeded with business-like directness.

"Let's see you draw," he began briskly, "but do it slow. Later we'll brisk it up if needed."

The young man's eyes lighted and he whipped round on Jennison as if he were a potential antagonist to meet an instant and imperious rebuke.

"Don't draw on *me*!" Jennison snapped sternly. "I don't never pint a gun at nobody fur fun and likewise won't let nobody play at me fur a target. That's one thing don't you never forgit."

The young man blinked his surprise.

"I figured you wanted me to," he apologized.

"Not and never by a damned long sight," Jennison asserted flatly. "That thar tree'll serve. Play it's Sweet Sugar Smith."

POSSIBLY the presence of the premier gunsman served somewhat at first to awe the youngster, but under Jennison's shrewd coaching he showed notable improvement. And he could shoot, though Jennison minimized the need of sheer bull's-eye accuracy.

"You've gotta remember," he counseled practically, "that distance don't figger in a gun fight. Moren seldom she's close shootin'. Gittin' your six-gun out into the breeze and pintin' in a general direction is like to be the main thing."

"How about fanning and shooting from the hip?" Samuels queried.

"Both is more or less freak shootin'," Jennison disparaged. "I'd figger 'em out of my line if I was you unless you wanta practice longer than you mebbly will. You've gotta sight by feel and she's a hard way to learn."

"But both ways are awful fast," the other insisted. "I've heard that you generally shoot from the hip through your open ended holsters. I'm curious about it. Let's see how you do it."

Jennison looked at him appraisingly.

"Where'd you hear so much about me?" he asked at length.

"Oh, around every where I've been," Samuels answered. "Men talk a lot about you I reckon you know."

"I reckon," Jennison nodded. After a moment he added, "And men who hate my guts do the most talkin'. Well, we've done enough fur today. Now and then practice on the draw and tomorrow I'll meet you here agin."

A week of intensive training followed, and Jennison, a peerless teacher, found that in Samuels he had annexed a prize pupil. Not only did he have the rare natural gift, but he was an eager, indefatigable student. Certain it was that Jennison might well take pride in his protégé. The only thing that might have minimized that joy was the curious crowd. Drawn by the novel school, men invaded the secluded spot in increasing numbers.

Thompson, observant of the meteor-like progress of the young pistolero made a deduction and presented it forthwith.

"Bat," said he, "you may get that young squirt built up to the point he'll try taking you on for the glory of it. Don't you figger you've edged him up a plenty?"

"I've figgered on that some," Jennison admitted. "She's one reason I didn't cotton to the idee of wet nussin' him fur a gun medal. But I started and I couldn't stop too soon. Tomorrow, though, I'm closin' school. I've noticed a greedy glint in his eye, and fur his future health I'm pullin' the thing to a stop. At that, Whisperin', he's mortal fast. I'm doubtin' if thar's any faster."

"With one notable exception, Bat, my modest friend," Levitt interposed. "You rank by yourself. There is no near second."

"Thanks, Doc," Jennison replied, "and you mean it. Still and but, I can't outgallop old age forever. Soon if not sooner it 'ill trip me up."

"That'll be a hell of a long ways up the trail from here, Bat," Thompson asserted dogmatically.

CAME now the final day when young Samuels was graduated with highest honors from Jennison College. Bat and

his two comrades arrived before the star pupil to find two prospective onlookers loitering near. One was a certain nobody, the other Squint Oddie. At sight of Oddie, remembrance of the near encounter between Oddie and Samuels that night at the saloon drew from Thompson, the pat observation, "Reckon, Bat, that Squint's curious to see if he would have had as easy a time with Frank as it looked to us that night."

"He mebbly is," Jennison nodded. After a moment he added, "Squint probable could a toppled Frank then, but he'd fail a plenty now. This youngster is a high rank gunner and no mistake. Learned faster than any man I ever saw. But he's got the nachrul gift, Whisperin', and has labored on it. Sweet Sugar Smith had best look to his laurels as the post tells it, when Frank calls fur a showdown. Something makes me——"

He did not finish the sentence for his protégé had arrived, the confident aggressive set of his shoulders eloquent of his state of mind.

Jennison put him swiftly through a sort of manual of arms and pronounced him perfect. And then he proposed something that brought a sparkle into the youngster's eyes. They would match speed and accuracy. Two trees standing side by side each bore equal blazes made rather recently by some miner's ax, about the height from the ground of that of an average man. The twin spots were near the size of a man's head. If the casual wood-chopper had planned his work, two more admirable targets could hardly have been produced. Jennison stepped off a dozen paces from the trees and drew a mark with the toe of his boot.

"Take the left hand tree, Frank," he outlined his plan, "whilst I take the right. Doc here 'ill give the word which 'ill be 'ready, go.' We're tryin' fur speed, and also fur aim. As fur the latterly we can look over the targets, but will check fur speed this way—Doc, you're to spot who

shoots last, Whisperin', who shoots first. All set, Frank, and is she clear? And you don't look nervous."

"I've got the notion," the other replied. "And why should I be nervous. This is only for fun, ain't it?"

"Outen a moral doubt," Jennison conceded. "Well, all set Doc. Let her rip-ple."

At Levitt's words two hands swept holsterward, twin shoulders thrust forward, and ten shots followed swifter than ticks from any watch. Jennison coolly jacked



out the five spent shells, methodically reloaded his smoking gun then turned to the two judges for their memorable verdict. Whispering Thompson fumbled out the unbelievable truth:

"Frank shaded you, Bat, by the width of a gnat's heel."

"And Frank fired the final shot," Levitt announced in precise way.

"You mean," Samuels all but shouted in his excitement, "that I actually got in the first shot?"

"Just so," Levitt verified, "and that Bat overtook you in the mad race."

"First shot sometimes looms up mountain high," Jennison analyzed in practical fashion. "Well, let's squint at them said targets."

A CHILD'S hand could have covered Jennison's spread of five bullets. Samuels had spaced his more widely, but as the youngster looked, something lilted in his soul beside the commendable marksmanship. He had competed with the most renowned gunman in the West and he had fired first.

"Sweet shooting," he mumbled in ecstasy. Then a chilling doubt obtruded its blighting shadow.

"You didn't play quite fair, Mr. Jennison," he said almost accusingly. "You didn't shoot your best. You slowed down to make me feel good."

"Nope," and Jennison shook his head. "I done my best. I played the game strictly accordin' to the set rules. And that's a tip top target you made. Plenty good. Do you want to practice some more on the draw?"

"No," and it was a new Samuels that stood there now. "I'm finished up, Mr. Jennison. And I'm much obliged for what you've showed me. It means more to me than you can imagine. I'll be seeing you up town this evening. So long!"

As he swung jauntily away, truculence in every line of his lithe body, Jennison shook his head. Little passed between Bat and his companions until the door of their cabin closed upon them. Then Thompson turned about and his voice shook with emotion as he queried:

"How can it be, Bat, or is it? It ain't possible that at last you've met a man who's faster than you are."

Levitt, whose masterly mind worked always along well ordered lines laughed.

"It is because you are deceived by appearances, Whispering, my massive friend," he said reassuringly. "Remember, the signal was, 'ready, go.' Well, Frank moved at 'ready.' Bat waited for 'go.' And at that Bat's chattering pistol overtook the purloined lead. No, Whispering, Bat has not yet met his master, nor his equal even. And did you by chance observe the two targets?"

"Hell!" Thompson exclaimed delightedly, "Sure that's it. And anyway," he added brazenly, "that's the way I figgered it all the time."

"Yep," Jennison corroborated Levitt thoughtfully, "the youngster jumped the signal a mite. Mebbe over eager you say, Whisperin'. Well, then listen,"

TOWARD sundown Levitt was called uptown to set a broken wrist for a luckless miner. The task completed he returned to their cabin by way of the main saloon, The Brindled Pup. To find him out of the company of Jennison and Thompson was a rather notable event in itself. Nor did his explanation satisfy. There were men there who felt they had knowledge of a very clear reason why Jennison was not with the doctor. Stripped of all excess baggage it was simply this—the premier gunman agonized at his cabin from chagrin, wounded pride and toppled confidence. And while some pitied the fallen hero, many found in his fancied abasement a certain curious pleasure.

Frank Samuels was there and the way he bore himself was an offense to Levitt's eye. Nor was this all. The adulation with which his progress was greeted, the fawning way in which men hung upon his least inconsequential remark, finished out the unlovely picture. Catching sight of Levitt, Samuels marched down grandly upon him.

"Hello, Doc," he greeted the other in insolently familiar way. "Where's Old Bat?"

Levitt fixed him with a cold unfriendly eye.

"Mr. Jennison is home," he stressed meaningfully.

"Mr. is he?" Samuels mimicked in unabashed fashion. "Didn't know they tacked handles on names here. I'll be careful from now on. But tell him to come on up. I'll not bite him."

"Should you be harboring the insane idea," Levitt said scornfully, "that Mr. Jennison will stay away because you're here or any other man or men, disabuse yourself."

"Meaning what?" Samuels demanded belligerently.

"The meaning will probably become crystal clear," Levitt said coolly, "though whether you live to profit from the knowledge is very doubtful." And turning his

back squarely on Samuels he walked out of the saloon.

It was nine o'clock when Jennison and his two comrades halted outside The Brindled Pup and through a cobwebby window inspected the crowded barroom. Near the inner end of the bar Frank Samuels and his fawning satellites held high carnival. In the youngster's retinue were to be seen certain men who owed their lives even to Bat Jennison, now relegated in their fickle minds to the limbo of things discarded. Thompson growled, but Levitt merely shrugged his shoulders as he made philosophical comment:

"A dog would not desert a man who had befriended him, even if that man, once a prince, were now wearing a beggar's rags. But then men are not dogs. Why tarry longer outside the gate, Bat my illustrious friend? Let us go in."

They made their way quietly to the middle of the bar and they had plenty of room.

Boisterous conversation languished at their unobtrusive entrance, then some unknown snickered loudly while a man at the new king's elbow nudged young Samuels familiarly as he whispered:

"There he is Frank. Now's your chance. Make him take water."

SAMUEL'S birdlike glance traveled toward the trio, then he shook himself free from the bar and stalked clear of the crowd. Jennison observing him meanwhile in the bar mirror saw the other pause to slide his left hand with a reassuring gesture toward his holstered gun, before he raised his voice.

"Jennison," he announced blatantly, "this saloon ain't big enough to hold you and me both at the same time and *I've* decided to stay."

Jennison finished his liquor without haste and set the glass down upon the bar.

"All right," he nodded. "Stay."

'A smile crooked the youthful mouth—

ugly, sinister, leering. He drew a step nearer.

"I am staying!" he bellowed, "but *you're* not! Be moving now before I lose my patience."

Jennison shifted his back to the bar as he issued a grave, if useless warning.

"You've been bad advised," he stated, "but she's advice you'd be wise not to heed. Also don't bank on what happened today, for that was shootin' jest fur fun."

But the other was not there to be persuaded.

"You damned yellow-bellied coward!" he roared back. "I'm faster than you are and you know it. And I'm going to demonstrate. Fill your hand!"

Even as he uttered the challenge he was racing for his own gun though Jennison tarried until the harsh order had spun out its clipt second length. Then those agile fingers fell on his pistol butt, tilted, aimed and fired all in the same dazzling motion. Samuels, a bullet very near the heart, slid slowly to the floor, the unfired gun still gripped in his fist. While men gaped foolishly, the stricken youngster's roving eyes fell on Squint Oddie. Then spurred by black hate he did a notable thing.

"You talked me—" He mouthed a broken sentence, and his bullet had sped from his gun, Samuels himself dying in the amazing act. Oddie swayed a moment while a crimson circle limned the black hole that had grown so magically in his forehead, then he too sagged to the floor, dead even before his knees had touched the splintery surface.

"Oddie tolled Samuels down here from Rimrock to kill me," Jennison made tight-lipped explanation. "So I gather from Samuel's words jest now. As fur Samuels playin' the orphan, out to kill Sweet Sugar Smith fur the slaughterin' of his pore dad, that sure was a good tale. Took me in till this afternoon when he let slip a word that told me a plenty. Fur you see this here Frank Samuels is nobody but Sweet Sugar Smith himself."

THE SEA SNATCH



By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "The Sinking of 'Celeste'," etc.

CHAPTER I

ONLY A YARN—BUT!

"**B**EING down on my luck at the time," Tim Powell said, "I slipped aboard this yacht, *Wander*, while she was taking on water at San Juan. I had heard on the beach that her owner, old Richmond B. Redruth,

was dead. They were carrying his body to Florida, which was where I wanted to go. I never got there."

It sounded all right to Tim so far. He hurried on. "Gregory, her master, shoved me down in the motor room to work my passage. *Wander* was a big yacht though not as big as this one. When she dropped off her screw she did it at the wrong place. Trouble!"



***"Stick to Me, and I'll Make
Your Everlasting Fortune!"***

Tim was trying hard to make the yarn ring true. Some of it was true, so he had heard. He eyed his small, select audience and edged a bit closer to the blazing wood fire in the saloon of the Diesel yacht *Orranada*. The northwester that was blustering down the Carolina coast had chilled him to the marrow of his sparsely covered bones. He shivered at the thought of being ordered ashore.

From the waist up Tim Powell felt that he looked the part of a salty, venturesome wanderer. His watch cap, his shabby pilot jacket, his scrupulously

shaven, small featured, deeply tanned face all helped to create the atmosphere of adventure.

But below the waist Tim was plainly a beachcombing bum. His patched khaki trousers were absurdly oversize and his thin, formal patent leather oxfords were ridiculously incongruous. He bitterly hated those black shoes, shiny but cracked.

It was touch and go, he knew well, whether these yacht people would tolerate him. And the hell of it was, he reflected sadly, that he was as seagoing as he looked—from the waist up.

"Trouble!" Tim Powell repeated emphatically. "When that wheel let go! Do you know the Great Bahama Bank, that lies off the Florida coast and southeast of it? A big country, it is, running way down to Cuba, but there's two fathoms of water over it. Cays, reefs, sand ridges, and coral lumps, stick up here and there. Green water, yellow water, brown water, but all as clear as air, washes over that big shoal. The deep ocean pushes an arm plumb into its center—blue water, that arm is, for the Bank slides off from two fathoms to more than a thousand. A queer place, the bank, and a nasty one at times. That was where the propeller left us."

TIM'S eyes, blue and quick shifting, again swept over the three listeners in hopeful scrutiny. H. Pearson Ollivant, owner of this floating Park Avenue apartment, gnawed the cigar that adorned his ruddy and well-fed countenance in silence. His daughter, June, as pretty a little thing as Tim Powell had ever seen in wealthy surroundings, was fairly hanging on his words. That was all right.

But standing close beside Tim was the *Orranada's* sailing master. Captain Jeremiah Day was a young and highly starched officer of the thin, tall, curt type. Warm and immaculate in his blues, he stared sternly at Tim as if he resented the very pressure of Tim's sketchily shod feet on the soft carpet beneath them. That was not so good.

"From Nassau we kept in what they call the Tongue of the Ocean and ran north and then westward around the northern end of the bank. There was a norther blowing that was almost as stiff as this fresh gale that's whistling outside now. We should have given the bank a wider berth."

His eyes switched to confront, unabashed, the hostile glare of handsome Captain Day. He continued, with a certain relish:

"Gregory, the skipper of the *Wander* was a nice, middle-aged old duck, an elegant talker and dresser and an asset to any yacht—but he didn't know his water and he didn't know his business. When the propeller flipped off the end of the shaft he was through."

Captain Jerry Day ruffled up plainly enough at this reflection upon a yacht master. He scowled openly at the scarecrow of a fellow whose double-hinged tongue had won him an interview with the *Orranada's* owner. Tim Powell hurried on before he could be interrupted:

"Long before the deck hands—they were picked for their looks, too—got the heavy anchor over we were dragging the light hook toward the bank like a dog towing a tin can. We drew eleven feet and we were well in on the shelf before we actually hit. But when a swell finally set us down on a shoal spot it was a jolt like you'd get from falling from aloft. Her bottom crumpled up like a stove-in egg.

"She hung there while a dozen more waves swept her; then a big fellow lifted her higher yet and jammed her up on a sand ridge, so that she moved little more. But she was pounded hard and lay over to port.

"The chief and I—we were alone—got out of the motor room not more than half drowned. Two of the deck had been lost, but the rest had saved themselves by climbing up to the top of the charthouse."

TIM paused to draw a breath. The hardest part of his yarn was ahead. What he had related was all gleaned from newspaper clippings. What he would tell them now was sheer invention, sweated out the night before in the cold, uncomfortable shack that the shipyard owner ashore permitted him to occupy.

"Though we were in a mess, it looked to me as if she'd take it without breaking up. The worst of the gale was over. But Gregory was not trusting her. He pre-

pared to abandon. He ordered me aboard the launch that hung in davits on the lee side to get the motor started. Then he had a tackle rigged from the mast.

"He drove the crew to get out of the chartroom the small safe that he'd kept there, under his eye. They tried to sling it over into the launch. But the fellows that held the fall saw a comber looming up over them. They let go and jumped for their lives.

"The safe came down with a run into the boat, smashing the motor. Then the big wave broke over the yacht. It struck the launch square, carried her off the davits, snapping the ropes like threads, and swept her clear. And me with her.

"She was half filled, and tossing in the wild sea kicked up by the gale on those terrible shallows. I hung onto the wheel and we swirled away from the *Wander*. They had other boats, but as long as I could see the yacht and the spray spouting over her they did not attempt to lower. Later I read that one other man, the steward, was lost, but the rest lived through the gale and were taken off in two days' time. Maybe you saw that in the papers."

Mr. Ollivant jerked his head in assent.

"But what happened to you?" asked June Ollivant.

Tim Powell ventured to smile at her. She was small—petite was the word—and he felt sure that he was at least half an inch taller than she was in her high-heeled evening slippers. He took heart in the thought that she might consider his attire picturesque.

"Lots happened to me, but I managed to keep track of things," he said. "The launch and I were flung around and carried southward over the bank. That was a ride. The motor was wrecked. The safe was rolling about and threatening to cave in her strakes and my ribs. But it was a chunk of coral that finally did for her. She smashed up like a bottle.

"To leeward of her wreckage I caught

a glimpse of more coral projecting clear up out of the sea. I went over the side; then swam windward through the breaking water. To be flung ashore on that reef meant death; even the cresting surf was safer."



Captain Day grunted incredulously and drew a reproachful glance from June Ollivant. Tim was grateful for that support. He went on at once:

"The launch was battered to pieces, as I said, and her motor and the safe sank where she struck. By swimming hard I managed to hold an offing until the sea swept me around the northern end of the coral. Try as I could, I hadn't the power to swim in on the sheltered leeward side of the reef.

"I was about done when among the floating bits of her deck and strakes I came across a cushion made of that light stuff they use in life preservers. I hung onto that and was blown on over the Bank. The gale died with the sun. That was a night. Leaping water—crazy water—and me hanging onto that cushion. Soon after dawn I was picked up by a Bahama sponger that was threading a passage through one of the channels of the shelf. I was sick for a while after that. But nobody knows but me where that safe touched the bottom."

He came to a halt and waited anxiously.

CHAPTER II

STRANGE HOSPITALITY

"WELL?" demanded Captain Day frostily. "Is it your idea that the owner of this craft is a pirate or a thief

who will help you recover that safe?"

Tim Powell drew his small figure up in righteous indignation. There was obviously no use in endeavoring to curry favor with this tall, handsome and suspicious sailing master.

"I am not a pirate or a thief myself, but a gentleman," he said, deepening his voice. Now he spoke truth but he knew well it would not be believed. "Appearances are against me but I am the holder of a first mate's ticket in steam, a second engineer's ticket, a limited commercial air pilot's license and am a university graduate."

"And a bachelor of beachcombing," Day murmured to the girl.

"You draw too precise deductions from clothes," Tim Powell flared, with a glance at Day's gold-striped sleeves. "If I did the same I'd be looking around for a hand organ and a tin cup."

"You—" Day began furiously but a touch of the girl's hand on his sleeve restrained him.

"What was your idea in coming aboard to see us, Mr.—ah—," H. Pearson Ollivant spoke more gently than had his sailing master.

"Powell."

"Mr. Powell?"

"As you know, sir, the estate of old Richmond B. Redruth, late owner of the *Wander* is in the throes of a legal battle by his heirs," Tim Powell said, with an attempt at respect. "A good bit of it seems to be missing, including four or five big stones he bought when this recession scared him badly. From the way Captain Gregory handled that safe I have an idea that its contents are valuable—exceedingly valuable, although he hasn't spoken up at all in these legal proceedings."

"Redruth was a queer stick and toward the end mistrusted everybody but Gregory. He may have had half his fortune in securities in that safe. I don't know who owns the safe, or to whom to go,

but if I could get some help toward finding it there might be a bit of salvage coming to me and whoever helped me. And no doubt the court would say whose property it was."

"Lost treasure—salvage—a fortune on the bottom of the sea!" exclaimed June Ollivant softly. "Day, surely you aren't going to turn this down! It's just what we want for our cruise—an object."

H. Pearson Ollivant coughed uneasily. "Ugh—I'd have to consider the matter carefully," he said. "Undoubtedly Mr.—ah—"

"Powell."

"Powell and those who assist in the recovery will be entitled to some recompense, but—"

Delicately Tim Powell made a move toward deck. He believed in leaving before people wanted him to leave.

"I'll be going ashore, sir," he said. "If you should be interested—you can find me in the morning at the shipyard. I'm working on motor repairs on small craft just now, being a bit down on my luck."

Nobody, not even June Ollivant, objected to his going. That was bad.

It seemed to him that almost as soon as he left the fireside the cold northwester blew upon him. Then he perceived that this was not fancy; the door toward which he was striding was ajar.

He thrust it open and collided with a man just outside—a man who sprang nimbly away and then stopped when he saw who had emerged. Tim Powell recognized him as Riegel, the yacht's first officer.

It was Riegel who had attended to everything when the *Orranada* had come alongside the shipyard dock. He was a great mountain of a man—a good nine inches taller than Tim—with the shoulders of a longshoreman. His full, brown mustache emphasized the creamy pallor of his face and somehow toned down the weight of his lower jaw. Tim had a feeling that he had heard Riegel's name some-

where before. It was a common enough name, yet Tim had taxed his memory again and again for the connection, but always in vain.

Just now, Riegel's eyes, downturned, dwelt upon Tim Powell in a slow calculating stare.

"You, eh?" said Riegel. "Finished your spiel, have you?"

"You ought to know," Tim Powell answered brusquely. Being a small man himself, he had no liking for tall men. "You heard it, didn't you?"

Riegel thrust out a big, angry hand toward him. Tim froze in his tracks, his lean cheeks turning pale with anger. He waited, tense as a cat.

Suddenly the mate dropped his hand and gave vent to a deep-throated chuckle.

"You called the turn, sparrow," he said. "Curiosity's my curse and it's blasted dull on this glorified houseboat. Come into my room and I'll give you a taste of something that isn't right out of the still."

Tim did not move, though he was much surprised at this change of tune.

"Retract that sparrow and I'll drink anything you've got," he said. "The name is Powell—Timothy Mainwaring Powell."

"I take it back," Riegel said humbly. "This way, Powell."

Not altogether at ease, Tim followed him along the wind-swept deck to the inadequate room forward that housed the big mate.

In the cabin Riegel snapped on an electric heater. Tim drew close to it while his host bent over and unlocked a sea chest.

TIM got down his drink in a hurry and prepared to lie his way through a maze of questions. But the mate asked him not a single one. He spoke of the weather, predicting that the northwester would blow itself out by next sundown. Not the slightest interest did he show in the conversation he had overheard. He

interposed no objection at all when Tim said he must be getting ashore.

Riegel walked beside him to the spotless mahogany gangway of the yacht. With a flick of his hand he directed the seaman on anchor watch to run Tim's old shipyard rowboat in from the boat boom. The seaman fended off, with reverent regard for the yacht's paintwork.

Tim Powell, rowing hard, dropped astern into the black night and blustering gale where grate fires and electric heaters were just as improbable as safes lying sunken on coral reefs. The *Orranada* lay now well away from the shipyard dock.

"Did I put it over?" he asked himself, as the boat shipped a dollop of water that soaked his legs and started him shivering again. "A yarn like that is worth a lift in luxury in Bimini or Nassau on any man's yacht. But will I get it?"

It had been Tim Powell's observation that he rarely got what he considered himself entitled to. But that never prevented him from hoping. This last north-west gale had hardened his resolution to get further south somehow, into regions where winter was no termagant, but a bright-eyed enchantress, and the sea had a clarity of color that was the hallmark and sign of the tropics. Always it seemed to him life was easier in the low latitudes and the prospect of good fortune, of a sizable stake, much nearer.

Tim had no taste for railroads; he classed them with oil refineries and factories as dingy, rowdy things to be avoided or ignored. When he traveled it was by water or by air; without labor, by preference. And since he could not pay his way south, pitching a yarn for a soft berth and softer fare seemed the easiest way.

He chuckled at the thought of Captain Jerry Day or his mate, Mr. Riegel, doing a heel and toe on a wind-battered bridge while he, a passenger, sat behind glass, snug and warm, with petite June Ollivant to listen to his yarns.

"Amusing, even if improbable," he told himself.

Swinging his oars stoutly, he guided the heavy old rowboat among the shipping. The harbor was crowded, for the flood of migrant yachts was setting strongly to southward. Many taking the ocean route had run in here for shelter from the gale, joining smaller or more cautious craft, ditch crawlers that had come down the inland passage. Now many craft were waiting for a slant of wind, but not too much, to get out around Cape Fear and its formidable Frying Pan Shoals.

He ran in alongside the marine railway and beached the boat. At a trot, gasping for breath in the gusts, he made for the shack that had been his home for a week. It was little more than a paint storage shed, and despite the tar paper that Tim had tacked around the northern and western sides the icy wind spurted through. With chattering teeth Tim stripped scrupulously to the skin. He put on ragged woolen pajamas and dry woolen socks and a sweater. Jamming a soft white cotton hat, green lined, onto his small head he wormed his way in between blankets on the folding cot.

"I should have talked my way into a boarding house," he grumbled and dropped off.

CHAPTER III

A BLIND GAME

IT TOOK Tim a long time, in that queer state between waking and sleeping, to decide what was wrong. But finally an unmistakable swash of water close at hand jerked him bolt upright. His skull hit a carlin. In an instant he was wide awake, with sharp pains stabbing at the crown of his head.

He was sitting up in a transom berth in some sort of small craft that was making heavy weather of it. The wind was screaming in the rigging. His bewildered

eyes dropped to the floor and saw water—a good sup of dirty water dancing on the cabin floor.

Still in a maze, ridden by a queer feeling of unreality, he leaped out of the berth and darted up the ladder to the cockpit. A squat, round-bodied man with a stupid evil face that was the color of raw beef had his long arms wrapped around the wheel. Tim vaguely recognized that dirty savage.

Beside this fellow, staring forward at a storm try-sail that was lashing itself to ribbons on the main was a huge lump of a man, creamy skinned, with a full brown mustache. It was Riegel, still in the spruce blue uniform of a yacht's officer.

The sight of him did nothing to clear Tim Powell's mind.

Riegel shifted his black eyes from the thrashing canvas to Tim Powell as he tumbled up into the cockpit. He grinned mockingly at the sight of Tim's bewildered face.

That smile, and a look at the craft he was in, sent white hot streamers of wrath surging through Tim Powell's limbs. He had never been shanghaied before, but he got the idea at once. Gone down the wind was his dream of a soft passage south; gone was the vivid, interested face of June Ollivant. This was no nightmare. He was shanghaied.

"Why you—"

His wrath congealed into action. Tim sprang at Riegel, swinging a small hard fist into his face. The blow landed on Riegel's nose and sent a gush of blood down the front of his double-breasted coat.

The grin snapped off the yacht officer's lips; he shook his head with a growl and got another—on the jaw—from Tim Powell's right. He jerked up one hand, fingers wide apart, and caught Tim in the chest as he bored in again.

The shock of Riegel's straight arm, with all the weight of the man's heavy

body behind it, knocked Tim Powell off his feet as fairly as if he had received a crashing uppercut on the jaw. He went sprawling backward at the head of the ladder.

Riegel leaped forward as Tim clawed up onto his knees. The mate lifted a heavily shod foot and kicked out vigorously.

The toe of the big boot caught Tim as accurately in the chest as the hand had done. He was lifted off the cockpit flooring and hurled down into the cabin. His back hit the center board trunk with a stunning jar. He lay still, conscious but unable to move, in the dirty, swashing water on the cabin floor. It was cold water—so cold it should have been ice.

Riegel peered down at him, grinning again. And once more his smile faded. His somber eyes took in the sup of water that was so playfully darting this way and that about the flooring.

"Pump!" he growled at Tim. "Pump, Mister Timothy Something Powell, or you'll get your feathers wet. That came through her seams, not over her rail."

He slammed shut the cabin doors, but left the slide, above them, open.

Slowly Tim Powell dragged himself up out of the bitter bath in which he had been lying. He was still in the rig in which he had crawled into his cot. He sat still, trying to think, while his head and back throbbed in harmonious misery. Unless he could find a pistol or something heavy and handy to swing there was no use going up against a man like Riegel.

On the other hand, if he didn't pump they might soon be under. This old basket was running before it. The seas creaming up astern, though they failed to poop her or broach her to in the trough nevertheless were having their will with her under the waterline—bending her like an umbrella rib; thrusting trickles of water between her strakes; overwhelming her from below when she rode over

them. He must pump if he wanted to live.

"But why?" he muttered. "Why?"

RIEGEL was the man responsible for this old-fashioned and grotesque shanghaiing. He remembered that drink in Riegel's cabin, with the big man's broad back between him and his open sea chest and felt even more convinced of that. A strange yacht officer this, who carried knock-out drops or sleeping powders in his dunnage, and left his soft berth to go to sea in a sieve with a northwester blowing like Gabriel's trumpet. It would be an easy job for Riegel and his sawed-off man Friday to carry him unseen from his shack to a boat. But why?



Suddenly he remembered the yarn he had spun beside the grate fire aboard the *Orranada*, the tale of the sea-going safe, full of great riches, buried in the shallow waters of the Bahama Bank.

"Great Peter!" he muttered. "He heard! And he bit! He bit!"

He rocked with sudden, silent laughter that brought him fierce, renewed pain. He laughed at Riegel, forgetting the sad plight his story had thrust him into. Riegel deserting a yacht to follow a will-o'-the-wisp treasure!

"He'll never get the joke—the dumb hulk!" he gasped. "I want to see his face—see it when I tell him I pitched a tale for a passage south."

He sobered up as instantaneously as he had laughed. There were other, less humorous phases of that situation. They might both drown before he could tell Riegel that joke. He moved over to the rotary bilge pump in the corner of the

cabin, aft, and began to pump manfully. As he spun the handle he glanced at the motor, snugly berthed under the flooring of the cockpit and recognized the craft he was in. He had toiled on that one lung, two cycle gas engine.

This thing was the *Carrie May*, an ancient yawl, nailsick and hogged, that had lain off the shipyard for months, awaiting a gullible purchaser. And he recalled now that the dirty squat man on deck was her owner. Tim had seen him once in Riegel's company.

The yawl was about forty feet, on deck, and four less, waterline. She was as beamy as a scow and probably as fast. Her sails had been good five or six years ago. The thought that he was at sea in her gave Tim Powell a chill—more of a chill than the water on the cabin floor.

For almost an hour, with short snatches of rest, he pumped on. He pumped himself into dripping warmth while the boat ran the surges of the big sea.

Riegel, unspeaking, peered at him and at the floor occasionally from over the cabin doors. Finally the pump sucked. The water was out of her bilges. For how long?

Riegel's head came in sight again.

"She clear?" he called.

At Tim's nod he gestured to Tim Powell to come up the companion stairs.

"Get set to take the wheel, mister," he bellowed above the gale. "You've had the night and day in; it's Phipps' watch below now. Your duffel's on your bunk; put on some clothes first."

Tim Powell swallowed a surge of anger. He found a dirty old sea bag stowed lengthwise on a bunk; opening it he dragged out bits of his scanty wardrobe. He crawled into a leather jacket, relic of flying days, and dungaree trousers. Then, thoughtfully, he disconnected the handle of the rotary bilge pump and thrust it inside his jacket. With a sullen, submissive scowl on his face he banged on the cabin doors. Riegel looked down

then opened the doors. Tim slipped up into the cockpit.

Riegel watched him with smiling wariness. Phipps, the squat round man at the wheel, got ready to relinquish it with a soundless snarl.

Tim's reach for the short heavy pump handle was swift enough but the perverse thing caught in the ragged lining of his coat. Riegel floored him with a smash of his terrible fist. Then, as Tim strove to rise from the cockpit floor, Riegel put a big foot on his chest. The heavy boot jammed the pump handle against Tim's ribs.

"Let me know before I cave in your chest," the ex-mate of the *Orranada* said and pressed harder, but carefully.

Tim Powell fought for breath. The handle bit into him like the jaw of a vise. He could not move. He clawed unavailingly at the leather sea boot.

"Quit!" he gasped.

The pressure relaxed. "You take the wheel and I'll take the pump handle, Mister Powell," Riegel suggested very smoothly, bending toward him and jerking away the heavy bit of metal. "That's fair, isn't it?"

Tim let him take it and crawled to his feet. The following wind, gusty, rocked him on his feet. There was no use going on now. He looked at Riegel; then clutched at the wheel. He slipped behind the spokes and put a leg over the box. He took the wheel and Phipps snarling again, gave it to him. Riegel casually tossed the handle down into the cabin floor.

"Let her run as she is for a bit, mister," he commanded. He watched Tim long enough to make sure he could handle the spokes. Then he looked forward, on the starboard bow, and Tim Powell following his eyes, saw the masts of a pitching lightship.

"Great Peter!" Tim muttered to himself.

That would be *Frying Pan Light Ves-*

sel, ninety miles from Bague Sound. The yawl had used her heels—or been blown by the dry northwester—to good purpose during his long lapse from consciousness. He glanced at the sun and saw that it was well down astern. It must be three or four in the afternoon; Riegel had employed potent stuff in his drink.

The yawl under bare poles and the rags of the trysail was showing her broad stern to the following seas. In a hollow she would roll sluggishly; then stick her long bowsprit down as the next crested wave began to swirl under her counter. Higher and higher her stern would go while the broad sea lifted under her. Then, as the wave gripped her foul bottom and the increasing wind got a clutch at her, she would rush forward crazily on its bosom, gathering speed and yawing wildly, as if she were on a chute and diving for the ooze long fathoms down.

On and on she would surge. Then, with an abrupt lurch the foaming crest of the wave would creep on under her; her bowsprit would leap skyward and she would lunge dizzily backward down into the succeeding hollow. It was a tense, breath-taking job to hold her steady in those wild rushes and sudden lethargies.

Tim Powell, gripping the wheel, devoted all his attention to keeping her straight before it. He forgot Riegel; he forgot the *Orranada*; he forgot the pretty, small girl aboard the yacht. He spoked the dead worm-gear wheel alertly and wished to God he had a responsive tiller in his hands. Slowly he got the hang of steering with a wheel that had no feeling to it.

Riegel, ignored, stood by his shoulder, eyes ahead, and watched attentively Tim Powell's control over the plunging, racing craft.

For five minutes he stood thus, and then he clapped the smaller man on the shoulder.

"Stick to me, mister, and I'll make your everlasting fortune," he said bending to shout into Tim's ear. "I didn't leave that nice snap astern for nothing."

"Like hell you didn't," Tim muttered to the gale, but he had no difficulty in keeping his face straight. The humor had worn off the situation.

"We'll beat her to the Bank," Riegel said. "And then—we'll see."

"A thin chance of beating a Diesel yacht—and we running southeast," Tim Powell shouted back.

Riegel grinned broadly and jerked his brown mustache.

"She's got motor trouble, mister," he said. "I know about Diesels—enough to stop 'em for a bit. We'll be off the Bank before them—I know!"

Tim Powell whistled softly. Riegel was certainly playing it whole hog. So the *Orranada* and handsome Captain Day and pretty June Ollivant were still astern, delayed by barratry.

"Stick to me, mister, and I'll make your everlasting fortune," Riegel roared again and winked and nodded confidentially. He glanced cautiously down into the cabin, where Phipps had slung his round body upon a bunk and now was deep in sleep. Then he went on, with his voice tuned barely to reach Tim's ears above the shrilling of the gale. "Halves in my proposition—halves. I know I need your help."

Tim Powell gave her a spoke and took it back. He simulated thought. Then he jerked a questioning finger toward Phipps.

"Don't worry about him," Riegel said. "Phipps will be glad to come out of it with his life—when I'm through with him. Why waste money on that kind o' cattle?"

"I'll think it over," Tim answered gruffly. "I've still a bit to square with you."

Riegel laughed. "Don't try it till this gale's blown out, mister," he said mock-

ingly. "It wouldn't be safe. It's all hands to keep this basket afloat."

DELIBERATELY he turned his back on Tim Powell and thrust his big legs ahead of him down the companion ladder. He pulled up a section of plank forward of the motor to survey the amount of water swashing about in her below the cabin floor. A gush of water spouted up at his face as the *Carrie May* jumped.

Frowning, Riegel laid hold of the unconscious Phipps by the collar of his pilot jacket and heaved him out of the bunk. Stupefied, bewildered, Phipps offered no resistance. Riegel shook him awake and slung him toward the pump, shouting an order. Obediently the man picked up the handle, fitted it and ground away.

"A swell watch below for Phipps," Tim muttered thoughtfully.

Riegel dropped into the bunk, pulled some blankets over him, yawned and turned his face to the side. Phipps pumped on, first sleepily unaware of anything but the pump handle; then conscious that Tim Powell was staring down at him intently when the erratic slide and dive of the yawl permitted. His small, red-rimmed eyes met Tim's.

Tim Powell flung with a clenched fist toward Riegel; then toward the belaying pins in the shrouds. He made the gesture of one tapping another on the head and pointed to Riegel again. Then, with an affectionate smile, he included Phipps and himself in a sweeping motion.

The man toiling at the pump paused for an instant. His dull, ruddy face lit up in comprehension. He thrust a hand beneath the collar of his coat, down into the neighborhood of his left armpit, and drew out a long-barrelled black six-shooter. He leveled this at Tim Powell with a menacing snarl, twitching his trigger finger. After a full minute he put it away again, and resumed pumping.

"I get you," Tim mumbled regretfully. "You like being slung out of a warm bunk in your watch below. I guess Riegel's been making you a fifty-fifty proposition, too."

He ignored the round-bodied man and studied the horizon behind him. It had not the lowering, livid appearance that is associated with a storm. The white clouds were ragged and the blue that showed between their shredded masses had a metallic look about it.

"A hard-boiled sky," Tim decided. "This northwester's just beginning to blow."

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF THE NORTHWEST

THE *Carrie May* ran on through the dying afternoon. The seas were building up, steadily, lifted by the same rabid wind that blew their tops off in an explosion of white foam and spray. Occasionally, when she poised on a narrow, green-rimmed crest the wave would break and the boat, enveloped in white unbuoyant water, would take some into her cockpit on either board. But usually she shook herself free, with streaming rails. The cockpit was self bailing.

Phipps, dozing on the bunk opposite his master between spells of pumping, had shut the cabin doors to keep the occasional flood from rushing below. But as the yawl plunged on, hurled forward with increasing violence, he pumped more often and rested less. To Tim Powell he paid no attention. In that gale Tim was bound to the wheel as surely as if chained there. The boat would broach to in an instant if left to herself.

At sunset—a green and copper sunset, with sun dogs in attendance—Riegel came up into the cockpit. He stared at the sun and at the unseen land over which it was setting. Then he faced the wind like a man facing a dangerous and crafty antagonist. His eyes played over

the streaked seas astern which now were turning gray in anticipation of the night.

Riegel scowled. "What do you think?" he shouted at Tim Powell. "We'll be running her under."

Tim shrugged his shoulders. "We're in for some weather," he answered. "Nobody but a damned fool would have taken this leaky box out in the face of it."

"Turning yellow?"

"Me? I been yellow and green like that sunset ever since I woke up," Tim rasped. "Are you going to heave her to or talk yourself under?"

Riegel called Phipps out of the cabin and sent him forward to bend on a small storm jib. The try-sail had gone down the wind long ago. Riegel managed to double reef the mizzen somehow without letting the sail blow out. Then he pulled the cabin slide shut and nodded to Tim.

"Try to get her round," he yelled. "Starboard tack! But wait for a smooth! If she—"

Tim Powell, staring to windward at the oncoming ridges of hissing water, saw what he was looking for but had not hoped to sight. There was a sea coming that gave no indications of cresting—a rounded, stunted sea, smaller than its white-topped towering brethern.

"Jump, you farmer!" he yelled, and waved wildly to Phipps, forward. At the very instant that the wave passed under and the yawl rose high, he spun the wheel. Fleeting he wished that June Ollivant could see him at this moment of peril.

The *Carrie May*, hesitating upon the crest, yawed to starboard in violent obedience, and dropped into the trough, beam to it.

ANOTHER wave, breaking, gigantic, bore down upon her, as if bent upon catching her broadside on and rolling her over. But the yawl's bows were still swinging, swinging to meet the sea

under the urge of her momentum and the hard-over rudder.

The sea rushed at her, but her head came about to take it. With a gush of white water the wave was on her; flinging her back. The three men aboard, half drowned, worked like madmen. As she broke through the crest with water over her skylight and streaming off her rails the tiny jib was backed. The reefed mizzen, handkerchief size, was drawing. She was around; hove to.

With redoubled wrath the wind shrieked through her scant rigging. Wires screamed and ropes thrummed. She was fronting the wind and sea now, not fleeing from it. The result was that the seas and the wind instantly assailed her with what seemed unbearable ferocity. But she was taking it on the starboard bow now, not upon the stern. Overwhelm her the seas might, but they could not run her under or broach her to and roll her over.

Phipps, trying to crawl aft into the cockpit, was hit by another burst of white water and flung backward on top of the skylight. He rolled toward the rail, clutching vainly at the capsized dinghy lashed to the cabin trunk. Riegel jumped forward, grabbed him in his long arms and slung him back into the water filled cockpit.



That was a night, nor was the day that followed in the least less hard. Pumping, bailing, watching the tiny bits of straining canvas, they hung onto life. Cold water and cold food. Bitter wind and bitter sea. Thrown skyward; hurled into caverns of thunderous water.

Their faces were battered raw by the pelting spray that came over the bow like lashing hailstones. Their eyes were sore and dimmed; their hands like wooden blocks. Their bodies were black with bruises, for no man could guess the next movement of the struggling boat. The three men worked like a body fighting for its life.

JIB and mizzen should never have withstood that ordeal of water and wind, but they held. And then, as the northwester began to puff out, the sea rose higher yet. What the wind failed to do the waves attempted, and it seemed that no wooden fabric joined by man could hold together under such a pounding. But, nailsick and loose, she stood the gaff. Some do.

The sea, exhausted, gradually gave it up.

All that next night two men lay like dead upon the bunks and one man pumped. Sometimes the water on the cabin floor leaped in puny imitation of the seas outside and drenched the sleepers, but they paid no more heed than corpses. And the sun came up upon a yawl that still mounted the surges.

Riegel, who had spared himself at the merciless expense of the iron-bodied Phipps and at Tim Powell's expense when that course was not too dangerous, was the best off of the three. He it was who set a course on guesswork for the Bahama Bank, and later hailed a wallowing freighter running up the blue waters of the Gulf Stream to get their position. His watch upon Tim Powell was resumed as the wind died and the wild sea dropped to a heavy swell.

Tim Powell sounded out Phipps again, and got that same response; a snarl and a drawing of the six shooter, now rusted and more murderous looking than ever. He tried to jump the round-bodied man.

Riegel, below in his bunk, leaped up from what had seemed deep slumber into

instant action. Tim got one hand on the muzzle of the gun, but a blow from a bottle that Riegel had caught up ended the battle. Tim awakened later in his bunk, with a splitting head and a decision to wait until he felt more agile before trying conclusions again.

Riegel puzzled him. The man's talk about making his fortune had been greedy enough. And now he crowded canvas on the yawl and almost drove her under. Yet as they ran southward under started sheets, with an easterly almost abeam he never asked a question about the safe that lay on a shoal bottom, according to Tim Powell's vivid imagination. That was no way for a man bound treasure-hunting to act. Grim, purposeful, but utterly incurious.

In some uncertainty at this attitude Tim Powell consulted the water-soaked newspaper clipping from which he had drawn his vivid description of the wrecking of the *Wander*. Riegel was below in a bunk at the time, Phipps at the pump and Tim at the wheel. He read the story carefully, refreshing it in his mind so that he would not contradict himself upon any important fact. He had never seen the *Wander*.

"When the time comes to break the news that there is no safe I want to throw it at him as I'd chuck a brick," Tim confided to himself, as he skimmed on down the column.

Suddenly his eyes came to a complete stop just at the bottom of the clipping. His jaw sagged as if the muscles had been cut. There was a list of the *Wander's* crew. His eyes focussed unwinkingly upon one name. E. H. Riegel, mate.

"Riegel!" Tim muttered. "Riegel! That's why the name seemed familiar. But it couldn't have been this Riegel! He wouldn't have shanghaied me to go for a treasure that he knew didn't exist. It must be some other Riegel. Just a coincidence, that's all."

But he was still staring at that name.

fascinated, when a shadow fell on the deck beside him. Riegel, light-footed and swift, had slipped up the companionway. The huge mate was towering over him, staring down under his heavy lids. Tim Powell glared back after a quick side-glance toward the pinrail where the nearest heavy bit of metal was to be had.

The big man made no movement of aggression. He did not even snatch at the clipping as Tim shoved it back into his pocket. But he laughed softly as he read Tim's face.

"Yes, mister," he said. "I was mate in her—mate! And I was so immersed in my duties that I never saw that safe, not even after we struck, though I've usually a good eye for that sort of thing. Funny, isn't it?"

He laughed again and tapped Tim Powell, on the shoulder with great good humor. "Stick with me, little one, and you'll wear diamonds in your front teeth. Cross me and you'll have no front teeth. This is big."

He swung around and walked forward, to sweat up the mainsail with mighty heaves on the halliards.

CHAPTER V

RIEGEL'S COURSE

TIM POWELL was sunk. Mate of the *Wander!* He understood Riegel's lack of interest in that non-existent safe now, but what was the game? A man with a soft job doesn't chuck it down the wind, shanghai a teller of tales, and put to sea in a leaky old basket with a January northwester blowing his ears off unless he has a good reason for so acting. And Tim was keeping his own dead reckoning. They were certainly bound for the Bahamas and the Bank. It was warm now. He was getting his passage south.

Tim gave it up. They were on some dubious and lucrative enterprise; that was all he could guess. He stood his

watch, said nothing, used his eyes and ears unsparingly but to no purpose and waited. There might be pickings for him, and certainly he could make a chance to sling a monkey wrench in Riegel's machinery.

In the face of Riegel's efforts to win his good will or at least his cooperation he remained noncommittal. He waited. He waited through another blow in the unquiet Gulf Stream—another exhausting day and night of danger and lost distance. He waited until the low land of Elbow Cay rose up out of the blue water one mild and sunny day. The Bahamas were ahead—the Bahamas and the Great Bahama Bank. And still he had no clue to Riegel's game.

Riegel gave the land a wide berth. He kept to eastward of Abaco; then rounded the southern point of the island and ran westward, well north of Nassau, for the northern end of the Great Bank.

Tim, scowling at the compass, checked his own reckoning with the chart that Riegel left openly in view on his bunk. Undoubtedly they were bound for the exact latitude and longitude of the point on the edge of the Bank where the *Wander* had flogged her bottom out upon the reef.

With the wind on the port quarter they ran on until there was blue water to starboard and water of many hues, green and brown and yellow, to port. They had reached the barrier reefs of the Bank. There the sea thinned out to a mere glassy film and the bottom, with its weeds, grass, coral, sand and quick little colorful fishes lay exposed to the casual eye.

On the edge of the blue water the *Carrie May* crawled on through a vivid but almost windless night. Riegel, more anxious than ever for speed, commanded Tim Powell to start the motor, but Tim, tinkering with it, surreptitiously cut an ignition wire, bound it up with tape, and told Riegel that the salt water had

got to her battery and there was no life in it. Riegel cursed, but did not question the diagnosis. He remained on deck most of the night, staring ahead.

An hour after the quick dawn they sighted the wreck of the *Wander*. That once majestic pleasure craft was a sad sight. She lay on her bilge well in on the bank. Her iron sides were a mass of rust as if the paint had been scoured off her. Most of her wooden superstructure was swept away. Tim Powell, staring at her through Riegel's glasses, made out that more than the sea and the wind had been at her. Her deck was stripped clear of metal fittings of every sort; doubtless she had been gutted by Bahama conches, wandering spongers and fishermen who found her easier to wrest a living from than the unquiet sea.

RIEGEL sent Phipps up the mainmast to the spreader to con the ship over the shallow bank and took the wheel himself.

"Go forward, mister," he said to Tim, with a lift of excitement in his voice. "We're almost there. Stand by to let go the anchor."

Giving the shoal where the bones of the *Wander* lay a respectful berth he headed the yawl in over the bank. There was plenty of water for a centerboard craft upon the shelf, save in those places where a reef, a sandbar or a coral head rose toward the surface.

Carefully speaking her as Phipps directed, Riegel reached in over the Bank for half a mile or more. Then, as Phipps bellowed down and pointed out a sand bar upon which the water lapped only inches deep, he swung the *Carrie May* to leeward of it and pointed her into the wind.

"Let go, mister!" he bawled, leaving the wheel and running forward. Meekly Tim slid the anchor over the side and paid out the chain, giving her plenty of scope.

"And here we are, right over the safe, most likely," Riegel said with a wink. He smoothed his mustache solicitously and stared at the small man beside him. "And still he doesn't want to know what it's all about."

"The only answer I want is why you shanghaied me," Tim Powell flared. "And I've an idea I'll drag it out of your throat before you and I part company."

Riegel's teeth showed beneath the neat, brown mustache.

"You don't have to be brutal about it," he said reprovingly. "I'll tell you why I shanghaied you. I needed another man—a seaman and a crook. And when you sprang that tale in the *Orranada* I knew I had found just the sort I wanted. Where would we ha' been in the offshore run without another man? Stand by, mister, and when you see the lay you'll thank me with tears in your eyes for doctoring your drink."

He swung around and went aft, got his glasses and took a careful squint along the horizon. Tim Powell, lowering and stowing the sails with Phipps, looked too. He saw neither smoke nor sail. Save for the hulk of the *Wander*, to northward, the yawl was alone. She swung idly on a surface so lucid and unruffled that she seemed buoyed up by air above a lush hanging garden. And the garden was peopled by fishes whose brilliant hues rivalled and exceeded the hues of the tropic birds which might plausibly have flown beneath them.

It was stand-by then, all the day, without a word from Riegel or a glance from Phipps. Tim became impatient. Experimenting, he found that he could not touch so much as a wrench or the heavy compass box without drawing the alert and menacing eyes of his companions. Phipps' pistol was no longer buried beneath layers of clothing. Riegel made occasion to flip a smaller weapon from his hip pocket to try a casual shot at a sand shark that elevated a fin close to the boat. The shark

vanished, but he left a tinge of crimson in the water.

"I'll have to wait," Tim decided regretfully, for waiting was not his forte and he had well-nigh waited himself out by now. But he had something to keep him going—a cud of thought to chew upon.

He had believed, when he had discovered that Riegel knew his yarn was merely a yarn that he had seen the last of the *Orranada*, her portly owner, his alluring little daughter and the tall, severe sailing master, Jeremiah Day. Now, anchored here within half a mile of the *Wander* he was inclined to doubt it. Somehow Ollivant's yacht entered into things.

If he had a rusty safe aboard here I'd say Riegel was trying to pull a version of the old pocketbook game," Tim told himself. "But soon enough I'll see. Whatever is up, Riegel is hellbent to make a killing. And it's off the *Orranada* he'll make it or I'm a tailor."

That night Riegel and Phipps kept watch and watch. Tim Powell, seething with impatience, realized that it was over him, not the quiescent *Carrie May*, that the watch was being kept. When the sun came rushing up next day Riegel swept the horizon with his glasses, cursed in his throat, and then took another look. Suddenly he ceased to curse and focussed his binoculars upon a point to northward, almost obscured by the wreck. And then he chuckled.

"She's coming!" he said jubilantly. "A bit off her course—Jerry Day was never one to work things out too fine—but she's coming, mister. That was a powerful convincing way you spun that yarn."

Tim had no answer to that, but the advancing day proved that Riegel was right. It was the *Orranada* that was coming up, hand over fist, with a plume of water at her bow. The plume grew no less until, with a man on her foremast and another man swinging the lead, she nosed in toward the edge of the Bank.

Where blue gave way to green she let go her hook with a roar of chain cable and brought up. Tim caught the glint of glasses on her bridge. Riegel, watching through his own with his head just above the coaming, nodded in private gratification.

"They didn't lose any time—not a minute—after they got her Diesels turning over again," he muttered. "Punctuality—that's what I like."

The taciturn Phipps suddenly spoke, his voice tense with excitement.

"Don't we go through the motions—like we were dragging for it?" he asked.

Riegel whirled on him. "Shut your flap," he rasped. "No, we don't make any play of lookin' for it. We've got it, see? Make sail, both of you! We're shoving off in a hurry, the minute we got the idea that she's anchoring. We're running away with our treasure!"

CHAPTER VI

THE MISSFIRE HERO

PHIPPS' jaw sagged in admiration. He jumped for the mainsail and began throwing off the stops. Less rapidly Tim Powell moved to the halliards. Riegel sat where he was, on the deck of the cockpit, with his eyes on a level with the coming.

Tim Powell did what he could to delay things, still uncertain how the cat was going to jump. As he slowly raised the dirty mainsail he kept an eye cocked on the yacht. Soon he made out that a glistening speed boat had been lowered from her quarter. Straight as an arrow the boat made for them, its motor roaring at full throttle. Long before they had hauled short on the chain cable the boat was slowing alongside.

"Stand by, Phipps!" Riegel snapped. His voice was vibrant with excitement but very low. "You—Powell! Come aft, here! Never mind the cable! Let her take it again but come here!"

Warily Tim moved aft. With quick eyes he noted two things; that Riegel's head was out of sight below the edge of the cockpit and that in the speedboat were the three to whom he had told his yarn for a passage south. Captain Day,



blazing in meticulous whites, was at the wheel; beside him was June Ollivant, and behind them sat Ollivant himself. A sailor, forward, completed the party.

Tim halted on the after end of the cabin trunk. From there it would be an easy jump onto Riegel's big body, flattened out on the cockpit floor. He was aware that there was a sudden flurry of excitement as the three in the speed boat recognized him. He heard his name, shouted against the noise of the motor, from Ollivant. Stealthily he got up on the balls of his feet. The mate had drawn no weapon, but he looked as dangerous as a coiled snake.

"I'll have to play it blind," Tim muttered, as he tensed his small body for a spring at Riegel.

Beside him somebody grunted, "Don't!"

He whisked around. Phipps was crouching close to him, just on the other side of the flapping mainsail. The muzzle of his rusty old revolver was peering out at Tim between the foot of the sail and the boom. It was hidden by the sail from those in the approaching speed boat.

"He can't miss at that range, mister," Riegel snapped with a side glance at Tim. "Jump me and you chuck away your life!

He's killed before—Phipps has! And this is worth killing for."

Tim shrugged his shoulders and stuck his hands in the pockets of his dungarees. It was too early in an unknown game to get himself shot.

The tender of the *Orranada*, with reversed propeller churning, drew close alongside the yawl. Captain Jerry Day shouted a command to the sailor, shoved the motor out of gear and sprang aboard. His eyes bore upon Tim Powell on top of the cabin trunk.

"Powell!" he shouted, shaking a gaunt, clenched fist at Tim. "So you thought you'd try it without us, did you? Perhaps you want it all yourself—not just salvage! Is that safe aboard this craft?"

Forward the white-uniformed sailor of the *Orranada* had swarmed aboard the *Carrie May* with a line that he made fast to the starboard shrouds of the yawl.

Behind Captain Day, June Ollivant, her brown face ablaze with excitement, had scrambled over the rail of the yawl. Less nimbly her father came aboard, too. The girl's leap into the cockpit nearly caused her to step upon the prone figure of Riegel.

Her "Oh!" of astonishment caused Day to swing around.

Leisurely Riegel got to his feet.

"You!" exclaimed Captain Day. His jaw sagged wide open. "Riegel! What are you doing here? What—"

"Ask him if he knows what happened to the starboard Diesel motor," H. Pearson Ollivant broke in, glaring hotly at the former mate of his yacht. "Ask him—"

"I'll answer that all in good time," Riegel said coolly. "Meanwhile—"

Forward there came a quick yell of alarm from the sailor. Tim Powell swung around in time to see the white-clad man falling over the side of the *Carrie May*. He landed flat on the water with a resounding smack.

Tim leaped toward the bow. He slung

the bight of the peak halliard over close alongside. The man's floundering body was a foot or two beneath the surface. Tim prepared to dive for him. But the man came up, spouting water, and grasped the rope.

"Meanwhile," Tim heard Riegel say, "I want you all to consider yourselves my guests!"

Tim spun around, gripping the line to which the sailor had fastened himself like a leech. What he saw back in the cockpit happened in a flash of time.

Riegel, still smiling, had swung his right fist upward in a short, hard uppercut. The blow took Day squarely under the chin, lifted him off his feet and sent him back against the rail of the cockpit with a crash. He lay there motionless, stunned.

PIVOTING with a single step, Riegel's huge fist shot out again, this time in a jab, not so hard, that landed upon the tip of Mr. Ollivant's fleshy Roman nose. The yacht owner's face appeared to explode like an overripe tomato. He sank to the deck, doubled up, with an incoherent cry of pain.

"Don't be unladylike, June!" Riegel said softly to the frightened girl. After those two swift blows he had drawn his small automatic. Now he twirled it by the finger guard and glanced keenly at Tim Powell. "There's a good looking man up forward that would like the job of holding you, June. Phipps! Come aft here and watch her!"

The dirty, round-bodied man obeyed, showing yellow broken teeth in a grin.

Spluttering, the sailor that hung on the end of the halliard managed to get enough breath to speak.

"He shoved me over!" he gasped. "That damned moonface shoved me over!"

Tim Powell gave the rope a yank that pulled the sailor through the water toward the bob stay of the yawl. As the

man clutched this firmer support Tim dropped the line.

Phipps was walking toward the stern on the other side of the mainsail. Tim followed slowly, making no move that might be interpreted as aggression.

June, with a look of speechless indignation, had turned away from the grinning Riegel and dropped to her knees beside her moaning father.

"Never mind, Dad," she murmured. "They—they'll be punished for this!"

Jerry Day recovered somewhat from his ex-mate's stunning uppercut. Lurching to his feet, he staggered a step or two toward Riegel. He struck out, a wild, feeble blow that barely grazed Riegel's broad chest.

The big mate laughed softly. He pushed Day backward. His eyes flicked with wary intensity toward Tim Powell, alert on the cabin trunk, and then turned back to Captain Day. He continued to twirl his pistol casually.

THE captain of the *Orranada* launched another blow, not quite so weak, but utterly ineffective.

Tim glowered at Captain Day as Riegel did not even bother to parry the blow.

"One of these blasted, death-defying heroes!" Tim murmured in deep disgust. "Hearts of oak and heads of the same! Can't Day see he's out for the round?"

"Are you striking me, Jerry?" Riegel asked softly. "Then I'll just hit you back."

His fist shot up again in another uppercut. Again a blow impacted upon the tall, spare sailing master's jaw. He went down harder than he had before and crumpled up beside Ollivant on the deck.

Riegel laughed, a deep-throated guffaw of mockery. With feet wide apart and hands planted on his hips he surveyed the scene for a triumphant instant. He had subdued them all without a shot. Phipps, beside him, showed his teeth, too, in imitation of his master, but his

grimace was more a snarl than a smile and his eyes rose challengingly to the quiescent Tim Powell.

"Ask Mr. Ollivant to step below, Phipps," Riegel commanded. "If he doesn't go—help him with your foot. And Miss Ollivant had better go down, too."

"I'll have you—hanged for this, you—you—pirate!" Ollivant blazed.

"Move!" barked Riegel in sudden wrath. "I haven't much time!"

The yachtsman staggered to his feet with the aid of June. He lowered his plump body down the companionway. Below, he sank upon a berth and permitted June to attend to his bloody face.

Riegel planted his toe emphatically in Day's ribs. "Time to get up, Jerry," he said.

The captain stirred wearily and, groping as if blind, tried feebly to drag himself to his knees. Riegel glanced down at him; kicked him again. Then, with his binoculars, he scanned intently the distant *Orranada*.

"They don't see a thing wrong," he reported genially. "I didn't believe they would, this far away."

Captain Day had slowly regained command of his senses. On his knees, he paused to stare down into the cabin, where June ministered to the needs of her father. Then, in a whisper angry, yet cautious, he addressed Riegel. His stealthy voice quivered with agonized protest:

"You fool! What are you trying to do, Riegel? You damn near broke my jaw!"

Tim Powell gasped.

CHAPTER VII

"TO THE LIMIT"

CAPTAIN DAY, having voiced that strange grievance, scrambled to his feet and flung himself at Riegel with unflinching belligerency.

Riegel's hand leaped out again, but this time he gripped Day by the throat, shook him with swift and violent ferocity and thrust him down on his knees. He shifted his grip around to the back of Day's neck and dragged him to the top of the companion steps. The yacht captain's face was a mask of fury and something else—perhaps astonishment.

"Below there!" Riegel said, shoving the yacht captain's head toward the two in the cabin. "Look at your romantic young champion, girlie! He wanted to be a safe and sane rescuer, he did! I was to be the villain of the piece—and try to kidnap the beautiful heiress while she hunted treasure where there wasn't any!"

Riegel chuckled and sank his fingers deeper in Day's neck.

"And this was to be the dauntless hero—this thing! With bare hands he was to beat me up, chuck my gun overboard, put the fear of God in my crew and rescue her and her fat but wealthy father. Later I was to get my share of the gate receipts—I mean the altar receipts—and meanwhile he gave me the cash to charter this leaky old basket to be a villain in. Look at him! Every inch a hero, hey?"

With savage delight he shook the groggy sailing master before them as a child might shake a doll. "Look at my old skipper—Captain Day—the seagoing dude—the perfect husband for an heiress!"

Tim Powell sat down placidly on top of the cabin trunk. Things were getting much too interesting to warrant interference. He lit a cigarette and stared curiously at the bent, unresisting figure in Riegel's ruthless hands. With the keenest curiosity he speculated upon whether Riegel's yarn of a faked kidnap attempt was true. If Day and Riegel had hatched this plan after his visit to the *Orranada* with his tale of treasure they must have worked fast. It was just possible that Riegel could have disabled a motor of

the yacht and chartered the *Carrie May* from his friend Phipps, whom he had doubtless known before, in a single night.

The next instant Captain Day dragged himself from the grasp of Riegel. The mate let him go, though he watched him with vigilant curiosity.

Day got to his feet and put one hand on the door to support himself. He gazed down flinchingly into the cabin from which two startled, almost horrified faces stared up at him.

"What this man says is true, June," Day said hoarsely. "I did plot with him for a chance to show myself to you in some other light than just a hired servant—the commander of a toy boat. He suggested it and I agreed. You may think it was childish, villainous—what you will. But I swear to you that my motive was not mercenary. And what I can do to redeem—"

Of a sudden he spun around with all the spontaneity of frenzy. One hand leaped to Riegel's pistol hand; the other shot up and caught the mate a hard blow in the neck.

Day's lean figure, bending and straightening like a thing of steel springs, rushed Riegel back to the wheel—almost toppled him over it.

TIM POWELL'S cigarette dropped from his fingers. He sprang to his feet. The snarling Phipps, close to him, waiting, tensed his finger on the trigger of the rusted pistol. The weapon was leveled at Tim's chest and it did not waver in the slightest.

At that moment Riegel recovered from his surprise. He jerked his gun hand free of Day's frantic clutch and with a roar of rage struck the man a crashing blow on the side of the head with the pistol. Day went down like a dead man.

Tim Powell stood still.

Riegel stepped toward Day, examined him carefully and then gripping him by the collar, slung him down into the cabin

with a single swing of his powerful shoulders.

"A hero to the last," he commented, looking from his pistol to the unmoving Tim. "Now we can get down to business." He jerked a finger forward at Phipps.

"Pull that sailor aboard, before a shark gets him, but keep him forward."

Bending, he glared below at the yachtman. "Come up, Ollivant!" he commanded. "Come up in a hurry, too!"

He added no threat, but the owner of the *Orranada*, clutching a handkerchief to his face, came stumbling up the stairs at once. June, below, devoted herself to half lifting, half dragging the unconscious figure of the yacht captain into one of the bunks.

Save where the blood dried on it, Ollivant's usually ruddy and well fed countenance was drawn and white as he faced his former employee. The sight of him drew a chuckle from Riegel.

Tim Powell understood the yacht owner's plight. He was up against harsh reality for the first time in a sheltered life. He could not be expected to show up well.

Riegel laid his big hand on Ollivant's chest and pushed him onto the bench.

"Sit down and be comfortable," he said. "Get this, Ollivant. I'm not running a matrimonial bureau for Jerry Day. But I am going to cash in big for myself on this play of mine."

He paused, but Ollivant said not a word.

"Understand this, right now," Riegel went on. "Nobody knows better than I do what a risk I'm taking. There are British and American warships close at hand, and the coast guard patrols off the Florida coast as well. There are cable and radio stations scattered through the cays. The *Orranada* has a high-powered radio set. I've counted on all that."

He leveled a rigid finger at the silent yachtman. "But a man can't make a big

gain without a big risk. I'm willing to gamble. And I don't think you're going to squawk—not when you realize what a squawk will cost you."

"What—what does all this mean?" Ollivant demanded, with an effort at dignity.

Tim Powell sat very still, though he knew that Riegel had not forgotten his presence for an instant. Riegel was let-



ting him hear all this for reasons of his own.

"Abduction on the high seas," the big mate stated coolly. "It's been done before. You're going back to the *Orranada* unharmed. That sailor is going to row you back in our dinghy. Captain Day—I can't trust him—will stay here. So will your daughter. Also your speed boat."

"My daughter!" Ollivant exclaimed, horror-struck. "You mean—you mean—"

"She's going to stay here—that's all I mean at the moment," Riegel put in precisely as the yachtman's stammering voice failed him. "You will tell your second mate to head the ship for Miami as fast as her motors will shove her along. With her draft you couldn't chase me across the bank even if you dared it. On the way to Florida you're going to radio your bankers for money — a hundred thousand in small bills—unless you think you can raise it on your face at the Miami banks. Anyhow, I advise you to get it and get it fast. And when you have it you come back and anchor out there where you are now."

He paused and his dark eyes contracted until they seemed like black, sightless

cavities under his heavy brow. His big lower jaw was shut tight and his lips were compressed.

"You have all the opportunities in the world to lay a trap for me, Ollivant," he said slowly. "You can have these waters swarming with destroyers and with shallow draft craft for pursuit over the Bank. You can get me in a dozen different ways. I know that. But if you try it you'll suffer."

He jerked a hand to indicate the kneeling figure of June Ollivant in the cabin beside the long, outstretched form of Jerry Day. "A word to the wise, Mr. Ollivant," he said softly. "The word is murder—if necessary. Do you get that? I wasn't built for jail life, Ollivant; I'd rather die if this game goes wrong so I'll play it to the limit. The game won't work unless it is played—to the limit. I know—you know."

CHAPTER VIII

AN OFFER AND A THREAT

OLLIVANT said not a word, but his lips went slowly blue and his white face turned a dingy gray. Riegel remained motionless, meeting the yachtman's horror-filled eyes with a grim, inexorable countenance.

"A hundred thousand for her safety," he said. "That's my last word!"

"But—but—what do I do with the money when I get back here?" Ollivant asked in a dry thin voice. "What do I do? I can get it, of course."

Riegel nodded his head. "You can get it," he agreed. "You ought to get it in two days. When you return, anchor. Take the suitcase with the cash and climb into a rowboat with one sailor."

He nodded toward the glistening white strip of sand that formed a lee for the *Carrie May*. "Land there. I'll come to meet you. If the money's right I'll send you your daughter unhurt five days later when I've made a start on my getaway."

Maybe I'll hand you Jerry Day, too. I ought to tie the sneaking fool to the anchor and give him the deep six, but I may not."

"But—but—how do I know that you will let me have June — my daughter back?" Ollivant quavered. "What—how can I believe you?"

"If you're looking for security, like a blasted pawnbroker, you won't get any," Riegel said smoothly. "I tell you I will send her to you within five days or sooner if I'm sure you haven't started any pursuit by sea or air. Isn't that enough?"

"No!" Ollivant cried. "How do I know a crook will play straight? How do I know?"

Riegel reached out a hand and gripped the yachtsman by the throat. He shook him with sudden, cold malevolence.

"You rat!" he said, deep in his throat. "Raise your hand when you believe me! It's your only chance!"

Strangling, uttering suffocated gurgles, Ollivant at once thrust a hand imploringly over his head. Riegel pushed him back onto the bench and showed his teeth in a brief glint of amusement.

"Now that I've convinced you I'll tell you something," he said. "If I get away with this hundred thousand I—we—will be delighted, for selfish reasons, not to kill her. And I don't want to be dragging any female with me when I start. I can't be bothered. I know what a roar you'll raise, you sniveling rat!"

OLLIVANT stood up. "There is a considerable sum of money on board the yacht—several thousands, and some jewelry of my own and my daughter. If I give you my word to—"

Riegel's hand lunged toward the yachtsman's throat again and Ollivant's words dried up.

"You've heard my terms," the big man growled. "Get into that dink before I throw you in. The sooner you start the sooner you'll have your daughter back!

But if I spot any sign of treachery—any boats standing by to grab me the instant I turn over June—God, man, how you'll regret it!"

"I—I may say good-bye to her?" Ollivant asked, with a pathetic attempt at dignity. "I—I must tell her."

"Help yourself," Riegel answered, with a wave of his hand toward the cabin. "But make it snappy. I don't mind telling you I'm in a hurry to get my hands on that cash."

Ollivant stumbled down the companion-way.

Riegel looked forward to where Phipps was standing guard over a dripping sailor. Then he swung around to confront Tim Powell who still sat on the cabin trunk, smoking a cigarette.

"Well?" he asked, grinning. "Now what do you think of the lay?"

"If it rests with Ollivant you'll get your money," Tim answered coolly. "He's a rabbit—and he's paid his way out of trouble—all kinds—all his life."

"And how do you feel about it yourself? Why didn't you jump me while I was putting the fear of God into Ollivant? You had a good chance."

"I'm sticking around awhile," Tim answered cautiously. He knew enough about Riegel not to waste energy in half-baked revolts. And in his mind a plan was forming—a gorgeous plan—a plan to take a man's breath away. He did not dare even to think about it with Riegel's keen eyes upon him. "A hundred thousand is a lot of money."

Riegel bent toward him. "And two hundred thousand is more," he whispered. He jerked a finger toward the cabin. "He's good for two trips to Miami—a hundred thousand each."

Tom nodded thoughtfully. "You think so?" he said.

"I know it!" Riegel declared. "What can he do if I hold the girl and send him back for more? He won't dare to squeal—and I'm keeping Day here so he won't

get any bad advice about not paying up. He'll have to come through—and by God, if he doesn't—if he turns the navy loose on me—"

He stopped and gave vent to a bark of laughter. "Well, what I said about it to him goes! If he doesn't come through—he pays in other coinage. I mean that!"

Tim nodded again in sober thought. "And why drag me into all this?" he asked.

"I've told you before—in part," said Riegel. "I needed another good man to work this eggbox down here — and I needed you on deck to be recognized as the man that told the yarn about the safe."

"Bait?"

Riegel nodded. "I had to make certain that Ollivant wouldn't object to running alongside and coming aboard with Day. But the big reason—"

He drew closer, with a cautious glance forward, and below. "The getaway!" he murmured. "That's the tough part of it. There'll be all hell's devils out here on the Bank and around the islands combing the sea for us once Ollivant gets back the girl.

"I'm leaving her on some cay where she won't be picked up for days after we've pulled out of these parts. But even so, the getaway's the only ticklish bit. I'll need your help then."

HE jerked his head toward the stunted little mizzen mast that was set in the counter aft of the wheel. "They'll be looking for us in a yawl or the speedboat," he muttered. "We'd be a couple of poor tinkers—you and I—if we couldn't juggle her rig, slop on some gaudy paint and make her look like one of these native ketches—at a distance. And then—we stand to eastward—towed the first night by that speedboat—and make an ocean run while they're scouring the islands and burning up the air warning Florida and Mexico to watch for us!"

Tim Powell did not commit himself.

"And what would my lay be?" he asked.

"One half!" Riegel said. "A clear half—and I'll tell you why!"

His eyes dwelt meaningly upon Phipps, forward. "A good dog that—obedient and all that—but he hasn't even the brains of a dog! Too risky attempting a getaway with him to spill the beans. When we get rid of Day we drop Phipps, too. And then—fifty-fifty."

Tim Powell mastered a surge of wrath at the idea that this trickster believed him dull enough to swallow an offer like that. Halves! Half the lead in Riegel's automatic—that would be his once he had worked her within reach of a port that seemed safe to the ex-mate. Halves! Why couldn't the man respect his intelligence sufficiently to offer a third?

"Maybe I'll think it over," Tim said. "Plenty of time, I guess?"

"Not so damn much," Riegel growled. "If you don't like it, mister, I'll give you what I'm going to give Day—a pipe berth forward with a coil of half inch manila in place of blankets! And when I can't use you any longer I've got plenty of loose ballast for a burial at sea. Make up your mind!"

CHAPTER IX

TIM'S BIG STAKE

THE apprehensive countenance of H. Pearson Ollivant appeared at the cabin doorway. Wearily he pulled himself up the stairs. After him came June, her blue eyes ablaze and her cheeks aflame in sympathy.

"Ladies below!" Riegel barked, barring her passage.

The girl's scorching gaze in no way abashed him.

"I have told my father that he must not give in to a few cheap cutthroats!" she said, her voice aquiver with her anger. "You would not dare to hurt me—not one of you! I have told him not to give you a penny—not a penny!"

Grinning, Riegel thrust out a hand to bar her way. His big figure completely blocked the stairs.

"It's lucky for me I'm no gentleman," he said. "Would I touch a lady? Watch me!"

Instantly the girl, her cheeks blazing, disappeared below.

"Into the boat, Ollivant!" Riegel commanded. "I've said my say! Do what you want! Phipps, send aft that sailor."

The seaman from the *Orranada*, lugubrious, dripping and thoroughly frightened, edged aft and scrambled into the *Carrie May's* old dinghy at a gesture from Riegel. Ollivant, shaken but saying no more, followed him.

"Break your back!" Riegel told the seaman as he cast off the painter. "Row Mr. Ollivant to the *Orranada* in a hurry. He has urgent business to transact."

He glared meaningly at the stricken yachtsman. Then as the man swung his oars and got the boat under way, Riegel tapped Tim Powell's arm.

"You're in this as deep as Phipps or I," he warned. "Better get wise and join. Meanwhile—you're still lying under the guns."

He jerked an explanatory hand toward Phipps and then went below. Tim saw him pick Day's still motionless figure off the bunk and carry him forward. Riegel dropped the yacht captain on one of the two narrow pipeberths that ran along the converging bows of the yawl. In these straitened quarters he made the man fast, hand and foot, to the frame of the berth. Then, as an added precaution, he took a turn around Day's waist with the bight of the anchor chain and snapped a padlock through the links.

Briskly he came aft again, to where the girl, head tilted defiantly, sat in a corner of one of the bunks. He paused in front of her, looking down, and she met his eyes disdainfully.

"Any funny business from you, little lady, and you go on the other pipe berth

with a rope necklace to keep you still," Riegel said coldly. "I'm risking my neck on this transaction and I can't afford to be romantic or gallant. Cross me and I'll tie you up! Now stay below."

Without waiting for an answer he ran up on deck and glanced astern. The dinghy had already made good progress toward the steam yacht out in the blue water beyond the shoals.

"Have they tried to signal her?" he demanded of Phipps.

The man shook his head.

Riegel grunted in satisfaction. "I knew Ollivant hadn't the backbone of an oyster," he said. "He'll do what I told him to do."

"The yacht is lowering a motor boat from her port quarter," Tim reported. "Somebody's been watching through a glass, I guess."

Riegel caught up his binoculars and stared. "That would be the second mate's idea," he said. "That slimy yes-man was always watching for a chance to do something bright. Well, Ollivant will stop 'em."

He jerked a hand forward. "Get up anchor," he ordered. "We'll be moving out of here just to keep temptation from Ollivant. And to show you how I trust you, Powell, I'm going to let you tow her in the speedboat."

THE anchor came up out of the soft sand with little reluctance. Powell jumped into the yacht tender with only a line of manila joining him to the *Carrie May*. He was free now—free for the first time since he had awakened on board the yawl. All he had to do was let go the line, duck below the mahogany side of the boat and roar away.

But, as Riegel had shrewdly guessed, he made no effort to escape. He headed the boat on the southerly course that Riegel had given him. He opened up the throttle slowly, to prevent snapping the line as the sluggish *Carrie May* re-

sponded to the tug. For a while as the power boat churned over the shallows and the yawl, with Riegel and Phipps dousing sail, trailing behind, Tim Powell kept his eye on the rowboat far astern. He saw the motorboat from the *Orranada* foam alongside the dinghy and then made out that Ollivant and the sailor passed over to the tender. Immediately it turned and, with the dinghy bobbing astern, rushed on back to the yacht.

"I guess Riegel sized Ollivant up right," Tim decided. "No fight. Riegel will get away with this unless—"



He turned forward and did some thinking. All his life he had been wandering about the seas and the borders of the seas. Most of the time he had been seeking a stake—a big stake—that had often seemed just over the unbroken line of the horizon ahead. But he had never caught up with it. Now it looked to him as if the stake were dead astern—sitting defiantly on a frowsy bunk in the cabin of the old basket that had so narrowly failed to drown them in the Stream.

Tim Powell had more than half fallen in love with June Ollivant at the first sight of her in the spacious saloon of the *Orranada*. She had more than beauty—she had animated beauty—life, spirit, zest. He had never fallen more than half in love with any girl, and usually it was quite as sudden as this had been.

"Blast it," he muttered thoughtfully, "if she wants romance who could give her more than I could? Haven't I been tackling long shots and getting into tight jams since I was fifteen? A seaman, an

engineer, an air pilot, a gentleman—with a nice easy disposition. I'd show her the world—topside and bottom. I've got everything—everything a girl could want but money. And she's got that. What could be squarer than that?"

Without debate he accepted the fact that in attempting to rescue her he might very well get himself killed. That contingency somehow was almost always lingering prominently on his horizon, even when the stake he pursued was still well sunken out of sight.

"Romance!" he whispered to himself, as the laboring speedboat threw itself forward, fighting with futile frenzy to free itself from the dead weight of the *Carrie May*. "Romance! Day figured that she had a yearning for it and rigged his plot; I guessed the same when I spun that yarn of the sunken safe. And she has a yearning for romance; she made her father come chasing down to the Bank to seek treasure—and romance."

He grinned at the thought of Captain Jerry Day, his bubble burst, pinned to a pipe berth beneath a sun-scorched deck. As a romantic figure Day was out.

"It'll be the deep six for me, not a pipe berth, if I ball it up," he warned himself. "Riegel's set on making his stake this deal. He'll be annoyed."

The wreck of the *Wander* was far astern now, a mere speck dropping into the sea. Almost in line with it was the tiny *Orranada*, already under way. Her course looked about northwest, around the Bank for Miami. She was hastening on Riegel's errand.

Until four that afternoon the *Carrie May* was towed southward, across the Bank, with Riegel or Phipps aloft on the mainmast spreader picking the course by color of the water and signalling to Tim ahead. Among queer ridges, shoals and coral heads over a bottom that seemed within reach of the hand the speedboat dragged the old yawl. Riegel, conning with an eye always to avoiding a dirty

sail or two that indicated a wandering sponger, nevertheless had a definite destination in view. His increasingly explicit directions indicated that plainly.

CHAPTER X

INTO ACTION!

TIM POWELL found himself towing dead slowly into a maze of sand ridges. The golden ribs seemed to spread in a sort of regular order, as if mammoth waves, receding, had left these great ripples in a widespread sandy beach. Two of these ridges suddenly curved away from each other to form a circular basin. Though its sides were apparently of sand and only two or three feet above the sea, it presented much the appearance of a new coral atoll.

In this lagoon the *Carrie May* brought up. Tim ranged the launch alongside her.

"There's some advantage in being shipwrecked, mister," said Riegel to Tim Powell. "I ran into this little maze after we abandoned the *Wander* and headed for Bimini in the boats."

"We stay here?"

"It makes a fine harbor for the speed-boat and we're less apt to cause comment when not cruising in company," Riegel explained. "We leave her here till we need her and go off on the yawl like the innocent yachtsmen we are."

"A swell place for murder," Tim commented boldly as he dropped over the power boat's anchor. "You've got all the privacy there is."

Riegel shook his head rebukingly.

"You've a nasty mind, mister," he said.

"Who would I want to be murdering?"

"Maybe me, maybe somebody else," Tim said. "There are four here beside yourself."

Under a brisk southerly breeze Riegel conned the *Carrie May* out of the basin and clear of the swarming sand ridges.

"Now we're cruising, mister — just cruising," the big mate said, conning aft.

"One neck's as good as another to a shoal draft boat like this, but maybe we ought to be near the Northwest Channel."

Tim Powell fronted the breeze suspiciously. "It's working to westward," he said. "I'll just have a look at the barometer."

He went below at once, without objection from Riegel. In the cabin June Ollivant was forward, holding a cup of water to the parched lips of Jerry Day. She met Tim Powell with hard, defiant blue eyes. He paid no attention to her but stood before the barometer, scowling at it. Finally she left Day's side and came aft, to take her seat upon the starboard bunk again. Her eyes were faintly, hopefully questioning and not at all fearful. A girl of spirit—this little one.

"I had a hand in getting you into this — unknowingly," Tim whispered softly to her, as he bent toward the barometer and tapped it with a delicate finger. "Stand by and I'll have two hands in getting you out."

He turned abruptly and went up on deck again, ignoring Riegel's thoughtful glance. Barometer's rising fairly fast and the wind's hauling around," he reported, with his gaze on a few puffy clouds. "If it hardens—you'll need water under your bottom."

"We'll have it, too," Riegel declared. "There's no reason why we shouldn't run into the Tongue of the Ocean."

Tim Powell laid a hand on the wheel and Phipps slid out from behind it with a grunt of relief. Riegel did not object.

"A willing sailor—since you learned the lay, Mister Powell," the big mate commented. "The course is due west. Phipps! Get forward and keep her off the coral and the sand."

THE *Carrie May* picked up her heels a bit under the urge of the southwesterly breeze that hit her on the quarter. At the helm Tim stared at the compass. He was conscious of the white strained

face of June Ollivant, below, turned toward him, studying him. He gripped the wheel more tightly and ran a hand with satisfaction over his smooth-shaven chin. He did not look at her.

Riegel was beside him, with his gaze directed to windward. Once the dark eyes slanted toward him and away again. Tim Powell sensed that the big man was not wholly concerned with the shifting, freshening wind. His head was twisted, not his body, and one hand rested on his side in an awkward position that nevertheless kept it close to his pistol pocket.

"He's on to me," Tim Powell decided. "June's face has given me away. That will make it harder—but sooner."

A puff hit the *Carrie May* and she heeled slightly. The breeze shifted a trifle in the blow, as Tim's quick eyes noted. It was now no longer on her quarter, but dead astern and still hauling.

Covertly Tim glanced at the main boom; she was not yet in danger of jibbing, of swinging that great club across the cockpit unless the wind worked considerably further around west and to northward. Phipps, up forward on the bowsprit, staring ahead, was quite unconscious of the shift. And Riegel beside him seemed to be engrossed in something that was not to windward.

The big mate's face was hardening and at the same time ironing out all expression. Slowly he turned toward Tim Powell. There was decision in the tautness of his face, a decision that Tim could guess. Riegel had fathomed his purpose. The showdown was coming.

With a determined effort of will Tim looked away from the big figure towering over him. He craned his neck astern—searching for a ruffling of the clear water. He struggled hard to maintain his easy posture. It would not be a pretty fight. Any instant now Riegel's big hands—

He saw the puff coming, though it was not dead astern. Casually he turned the wheel to port—a few spokes; then a few

more. He did not dare to look at the big boom out over the port quarter. To do that was certain to direct the mate's eyes to it. The wind that was now hitting it almost squarely on the after edge, causing the leach to tremble in uncertainty.

"Powell!" rasped Riegel. "You think—"

Just a spoke more Tim took, but that was enough. The gust with a rising murmur, swept down on the yawl. It caught the big mainsail aback. The heavy boom was seized by the invisible, tremendous power of the wind. Violently, like a club in the hands of some pre-historic giant, it snapped across the cockpit.

Riegel was not wholly taken unawares. His sailor's instinct warned him, though his eyes saw nothing, that the boom was coming over. With cat-like agility he flung himself face down on the deck.

Tim went for him like a starved weasel. The boom had failed. His one chance was speed. He hurled his small body at the head of the big man floundering on the deck. Riegel's skull hit the boards with a crack. Though smothered and blinded by Tim's attack, he was not knocked out. He heaved himself upward again. Tim, knees on his shoulders, battered at his jaw in a supreme effort to keep him dazed and devoid of power.

But the muscular, heavy body of Riegel was not so easily to be battered senseless. He wrenched himself sideways with a quick effort and Tim went flying from his back against the starboard bench. In an instant he was up again, but Riegel was already on his knees.

White with rage, growling incoherently, the mate was reaching for his gun. Murder flared in his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

PHIPPS' GUN

TIM saw the blunt little automatic come out of Riegel's pocket and dived, body and soul, for the menacing gun arm.

He hit Riegel hard. His legs whipped around the man's big waist; his hands clutched at the corded throat of his enemy. Riegel's right arm was out for the instant but the left came up like a piledriver. It smashed against Tim's ear. The jolt nearly knocked Tim clear of his grip with legs and arms alike. His clutch on Riegel's windpipe weakened. Desperately he timed the next swing of that mighty left. At the last instant he twisted his neck. The fist thudded against the top of his head. There was a sharp, snapping sound.

It was not Tim's skull but the big man's knuckles that had smashed. Riegel gave vent to a hoarse, gasping cry of pain. He threw himself forward to dash this clinging, strangling creature to the deck.

Tim let go all holds and writhed lithely clear of his heavier opponent. Once down on the deck he was done. Riegel recovered himself. While still on his knees his right arm came up like a leaping snake. The automatic barked once before Tim could kick at the hand that held it. The bullet cut through his cheek. The second shot went wild. Tim's heavy shoe had landed hard on Riegel's wrist.

The thump of running feet came to Tim's ears like the drums of doom. Phipps was charging aft, big rusty gun leveled.

The snarl that Tim Powell had seen several times before covered his face like a black, contorted mask of hate.

He was on top of the cabin trunk, commanding the cockpit, Tim was within three feet of him. The revolver was steady in the hairy hand; Phipps could not miss that shot.

Despairingly, Tim bounded onto the bench and then to the trunk to meet the death threat in that leveled gun. His frightened eyes could see the tensing of Phipps' finger on the trigger. His brain screamed to him that charging an armed man was suicidal folly. But his undying tenacity drove him on like a scourge. As

good a death as death in Riegel's hands.

Over Phipps' triumphant, twisted face there came a shifting expression; increased effort mingled with pained surprise. He looked down at the rusted revolver; his aim wavered; the cords stood out on his forehead as he pressed at the trigger.

Tim Powell fleetingly thanked the gods for the good salt water that had swept over Phipps and his gun for many hard days. Then, with shoulders hunched, he hit the squat, unresisting sailor with all the power of his swift moving body.

Phipps tottered backward on the sloping cabin trunk. The blow knocked all the air out of Tim's own lungs. But his small body was running then not on oxygen or muscle but on nerve. He butted again and Phipps, his finger still tight upon the trigger stumbled backward another step and splashed over the side.

With a hoarse, gasping breath Tim swung around, eyes swiveling down toward the cockpit. His lungs were burning up; his wounded cheek was spurting blood down his throat; his legs and arms had gone leaden.

Riegel was bending, coolly reaching a long right arm toward the automatic that Tim's kick had knocked under the wheel.

From the raised vantage of the trunk Tim launched himself in a spasmodic final effort.

Clear across the cockpit he leaped. His flying body smashed squarely down on the back of the bending man. Riegel crumpled under the unexpected blow of his hurtling enemy. He was pounded down upon the uppermost spoke of the wheel. Like a blunted spear it jabbed him under the breastbone. All purpose; all consciousness, went out of his huge, thick muscled form. It was a terrific thrust straight in the solar plexus.

TIM POWELL rolled from him to the deck almost beneath the wheel. He thrust out a trembling, clawing hand for

the automatic and cuddled it to his chest. This luck was unbelievable after the failure of the boom.

Appraising Riegel's condition with a single glance he staggered to his feet, caught up the canvas tyers of the mainsail and dragged Riegel off the wheel.

Literally falling upon him he bound stop after stop around the big, limp limbs of the mate in a frenzy of effort.

The *Carrie May*, with no hand on the wheel, had spun around into the wind. Now, pitching to the swell, with her sails slatting violently and her reef points drumming against the canvas she lay in irons. Fronting the rising puffs of wind, she waited for a man to give her purpose and direction. But Tim had no time for the yawl just then.

Panting, and coughing up the strangling blood in his throat he paused at last. He beheld the horror-stricken face of June Ollivant gazing at him from the top of the companion stairs.



"Got him!" he muttered thickly, swabbing at his red, dripping cheek with his sleeve. "I shouldn't ha' strangled him—I should have gouged his—blasted eyes out while I had—a chance. Politeness doesn't pay—not in that kind of a scrap."

June Ollivant did not reply to this observation.

"The key!" she murmured. "The key of the padlock that holds Jer—Captain Day! Get it from him!"

The terror faded out of her eyes of a sudden and she collapsed in a faint against the steps of the ladder.

Tim Powell, dragging himself toward her, victorious, bloody and apprehensive, suddenly caught sight of the raw red fearful face of Phipps peering at him over the bow. The squat man hung by his long arms to the bowsprit.

"Come aboard, you!" Tim coughed and gripped the automatic. "I'm ready to tie you up now!"

He climbed onto the counter, holding to the jiggermast, while Phipps, under the hypnotic power of the leveled automatic, padded slowly aft. Tim was not permitting the long arms attached to that squat, round, malignant body to come near him, just then.

From his point of vantage and retreat he forced Phipps to lift the girl up on to the bench in the cockpit. Then he ordered the sullen underling to drag Riegel below and forward, to a place beside the pipe berth on which Jerry Day lay pinioned.

Day, released by Phipps, lent a willing hand in padlocking Riegel to the berth he quitted. Then he bound Phipps as tightly and stowed him in the opposite berth.

These duties accomplished, he dashed up on deck, to where Tim Powell was regarding uncertainly the pathetic, huddled form of June Ollivant. He caught up the girl in his arms in a frenzy of apprehension, but Tim's choked voice instantly filled his ears:

"Belay that! Take the wheel! You're a prisoner. Get her under control! Port tack! Full and by!"

Tim pulled his small body upright beside the tall yacht captain and tapped him on the shoulder with undiminished belligerence.

"I'm master of this craft now," he said thickly, with a glance astern at the dangerous, cresting shallow seas. "To the wheel—mister hero. The course is west, Your trick! Take her!"

Jerry Day hesitated. Then gently laying the unconscious girl on the bench he took the wheel and headed the *Carrie*

May to run for deep water before the increasing wind.

"You'll have to be your own look-out—till June comes to," Tim Powell mumbled and staggered down the steps into the cabin. He swayed toward a bunk but collapsed on the floor.

CHAPTER XII

THE CLINK OF A CHAIN

FOR thirty hours the wind, hauling to the northwest, blew as it blows south of Cape Stiff. They rode it out with motor and shortened sail in the deep blue water of the Tongue of the Ocean, north of Nassau. Then the gale moderated.

Tim Powell headed back through the Northwest Passage and then out over the uneasy shallows toward that maze of sand ridges where the *Orranada's* speedboat lay rocking in the sheltered isolation of the sandy lagoon.

Tim was busy those days. His word was law; he knew his mind and he brooked no argument. Only in the daytime did he venture to release Phipps and force him at the point of the automatic to take his trick at the wheel and at conning the yawl.

Riegel lay below, securely bound, no longer cursing, but waiting with inscrutable eyes. He was freed of his bonds occasionally but Tim took on chances with him. Captain Jerry Day was not a great help in handling the yawl. His training had been in steam and in motor ships, but he obeyed orders punctiliously. Tim made it plain that the fate of the treacherous yacht captain would be decided by his owner.

June helped, too. She was quiet, reserved, unfathomable. But twice, with gentle fingers, she dressed Tim's torn cheek with a pad of cotton inside and out, secured with a bandage tied under his chin and around his head as if he had a howling tooth in his jaw. He was suffering from a low fever, but the *Carrie May*

carried no medicine chest and he stuck it out grimly.

He drove his strange ship's company and he drove himself as well, bound back for the northern edge of the Bank, where he knew the glittering *Orranada* lay like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He had no time for the matter of love making, but the girl had seen him fight and she saw him now, bandaged, indomitable, with two rogues who had plotted against her roped up below and the third a prisoner on probation meekly obeying his orders.

Under those circumstances. Tim reckoned love making could wait. He accounted himself a romantic figure, cracked patent leather shoes or not.

HE stood his watch with a swagger, kept his short aching body stiffly upright, wore his wound like a plume and shot the sun at noon without asking a check on his figures by Captain Jerry Day. He brushed his hair, shaved his one good cheek and wore Riegel's last clean shirt, which he found damnably big for him.

Though he was very tired he awaited hopefully an outbreak by Jerry Day. He was extremely careless about leaving Riegel's gun well out of his own reach. But Day gave him no chance to show his prowess again.

And that was as far as he could go in the matter of love—now. As for June Ollivant, though withdrawn and quiet, she was quick to help.

It was past sundown when, with a dying wind, they neared that unholy place on the Bank where the clear water shoaled and traced channels among the drying sand ridges. But the moon was full and rising, and under motor and sail, after a bad cast or two, Tim brought the *Carrie May* into the lagoon where the speedboat still lay at anchor.

"We'll go on at once, Mr. Day," he decided. "We're late. The *Orranada* will be waiting for us. Mr. Ollivant will be

anxious. You'll take the wheel of the speedboat and tow us."

In the moonlight he caught an eager glint on the face of the yacht captain.

"But first we'll take out o' the speedboat all gas but a two hour supply," Tim added. "That's a precaution, Mr. Day. Two hours will get you nowhere. I can't have you jumping ship. It's just possible, though I'm a fair shot, that I might miss you if you cast off from the yawl and tried to run for it."

Without comment Day assisted in emptying the tanks of the speedboat and putting back in them a scanty supply. Then in silence, he took his place at the controls of the powerful boat and passed a line to the *Carrie May*.

With Tim aloft on the spreader and the girl on the deck of the yawl the tender moved cautiously ahead. Phipps was below, secured for the night in the bunk opposite Riegel.

Tim Powell's keen eyes and pointing arms guided the two small craft out of the sandy wilderness. Soon they reached water that ran as deep as could be expected on the Bank, two full fathoms. They surged along at a brisk pace northward through the night. When the speedboat ran dry of fuel Tim descended and passed a can of gasoline aboard the tender. The second time, when he would have climbed aloft again, June laid soft fingers on his arm. He looked at her.

"Can't I take a turn watching from the bowsprit?" the girl asked him. "Please—you say the Bank is fairly clear around here. Why not let me do my share? I don't feel at all sleepy and you look so tired."

The fever had pulled the string out of Tim Powell's backbone. Gratefully he gave her Riegel's automatic.

"Two hours more ought to get us to the wreck of the *Wander*," he told June. "If Captain Day tries to come alongside on any pretext call me or sling a shot at him."

He stumbled below. He listened in his bunk to the rhythmic mutter of the motor ahead. Then sleep came down on him like an extinguisher on a candle flame.

He awoke to find himself sitting bolt upright with his feet over the edge of the bunk. Light—thin sunlight—wavered down into the cabin from the open slide and portholes of the *Carrie May*.

His head was cool; his fever was gone. But he could no longer hear the speedboat's exhaust. And in a dream, perhaps, he had heard the rattle and clink of an anchor chain running out.

He jumped to the companionway and ran up into the cockpit. It was empty.

CHAPTER XIII

HULL UP AND NO GIRL ATTACHED

A FRIGHTENED scream came to his ears as he whirled to glance forward.

The speedboat was alongside. There were cans of gasoline in it. Jerry Day was standing at the bow of the yawl softly paying out chain cable. The yawl's hook had been dropped. And beside the yacht captain, with a terrified face turned aft toward Tim Powell, was June Ollivant.

She had Riegel's automatic clutched in her hands. At the sight of Tim she pressed it instantly into Jerry Day's fingers with a warning cry.

Captain Day let go the chain and jerked up the gun. Tim Powell stared for a moment, his quick brain numb. His eyes burned with blue fire as they surveyed the girl. Then, resolutely, he climbed up onto the cabin trunk and walked forward.

"I'll take that gun, Jerry Day, or a slug out of it," he said curtly. "Make your play!"

"Stand!" the yacht captain commanded with stern emphasis. "Stand, you fool!"

The girl gave a low cry and clasped her hands together in an agony of fright. Tim Powell came on. He took the last two paces in a single jump and snatched

at the automatic that was leveled at his chest. Jerry Day did not fire but he struggled fiercely as Tim laid hold of the gun.

All Tim Powell had of sinew and will went into the fight. His small body hit Day's lean length with such momentum that the yacht captain, clutching at him, went sprawling on the foredeck. Tim fell with him, both hands fastened on the gun. By sheer muscle he ripped the weapon out of Day's fingers. Then, gasping, he leaped to his feet.

The girl, who had shrunk back against the mainmast shrouds with fearful, dilated eyes on the struggle, gave vent to a little cry of despair as Tim Powell swung around to confront her.

"Oh, how could I let you take Jerry back to the *Orranada*?" she cried. "Look!"

She ran a shapely, tremulous hand to point to the northward, toward water already violet in the slanting days of the rising sun. It was the northern edge of the bank and there was a speck upon the horizon that might have been the yacht.

"How could I?" she asked, still pointing. "Father would not understand. He might even have him sent to prison! And he did it all for me—because he loved me."

Tim Powell looked from her vivid tearful face to the blue steel automatic in his hands.

"I've forgiven him—and we were going away together, in the speedboat," June rushed on in a wavering, uncertain voice. "I—I love him."

Tim Powell swung around upon Jerry Day, who was climbing slowly to his feet. For an instant he examined the yacht captain with a sort of fierce intensity. Then he stabbed toward the speedboat with the automatic.

"Get going—both of you!" he commanded hoarsely. "You heard me, Day!"

Without a word the yacht captain dropped into the motorboat. He held

out his hands to the girl, avoiding Tim's piercing eyes.

June Ollivant took a swift step toward her lover; then whirled to thrust both hands toward Tim Powell.

"Thank you! Thank you!" she sobbed. "Oh, if I could tell you how I feel! And—and if you will take Riegel and that other man to the *Orranada* father will reward you far more liberally—"

"You'd better go!" Tim Powell said grimly. "Any moment I may throw a slug at that hero for a wedding present!"

THE girl turned and dropped into Jerry Day's waiting arms. In another minute the motor boat churned away from the side of the yawl. It headed southeastward, across the bank, ruffling the light green water. Tim Powell watched it go, staring hard at the tall man at the wheel.

He dropped onto the bench in the cockpit. Then he stood up on the counter and stared to northward again. Surely he could make out on the rim of the horizon a spot that was the *Orranada*.

"There's my stake—come over the edge of the sea to me at last," he muttered. "Hull up—and no damned girl attached."

From forward there came a deep, jeering laugh. He looked that way and made out Riegel's head out over the edge of his berth and craned stiffly aft.

"So they left you, did they?" he mocked. "I heard 'em and I held my breath for fear I'd wake you. And you let 'em go, you soft sap! Sunk! You should ha' played my game—not tried one o' your own, mister."

Tim Powell did not answer. He went up on deck again. Undoubtedly that ship to northward was the *Orranada* and his prisoners were safe below.

"Worth their weight in silver to me," he muttered. "Good seamen—but black-hearted crooks."

By himself he made sail. There was a light breeze from the northeast—a fair

wind for his purpose. With all canvas set he ran into the shallows, away from the yacht that meant a fortune for him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RIM OF THE HORIZON

TWENTY-FOUR hours later the *Carrie May* with steerageway and no more, glided through shoaling emerald water. She drew close to the reef that formed a barrier extending almost around a little cave that lifted to the eye coco palms, tin roofs and thatched roofs.

Tim Powell stared at it with recognition in his gaze. Then he went below and forward to the two pipe berths.

Riegel cursed him with instant fluency and Phipps glared in silent malevolence. The tempers of the two men had not become more equable with the passing of time.

"I'll ease up those ropes for a while," Tim said. "And maybe that padlock and chain is rubbing it in too much."

Riegel cursed him again, even as he took off the chain. "Let me up and I'll wipe your eye for you, you doublecrossing swab!" he rasped.

For an instant the fire in the big mate's eye struck answering fire in Tim Powell's. He made an impetuous motion to draw his knife to cut the rope he was loosening. Then he stopped, gazing thoughtfully at the swelling muscles of Riegel's chest and shoulders.

"I guess you would, shipmate," he conceded mildly. He moved aft and at the foot of the companion stopped to look back. Riegel was already working at the slackened rope, with teeth, heaving shoulders and straining hands.

Tim Powell stepped up into the cockpit. He swung the *Carrie May* closer to the barrier reef; then turned the wheel so that the yawl with sheets started, would steer herself seaward in the steady breath of air. He took off his patent leather shoes and tied them care-

fully around his waist with a bit of rope.

Standing up on the rail, he pulled off Riegel's big shirt and tossed it into the cockpit. Then he cast an inquiring eye around for the triangular black flag of a shark or the blunt outline of a barracuda in the depths. He dropped Riegel's automatic over the side and watched it sink to the bottom, landing with a little swirl of clean golden sand.

Lifting himself on his toes he dived cleanly into the transparent shallows. In some haste he trudged on toward the safer water inside the reef. Then he swam on more leisurely.

Suddenly something plunked into the water two feet from his head. He heard a report. He looked around.

Riegel was on the rail of the *Carrie May* with a revolver in his hand. He cursed his half-numbed hands and fired again and again. The shots went wild.

Tim Powell swam on with somewhat more celerity. The reef barred the yawl from pursuing him. He was soon out of range. He waved a hand casually as the firing ceased.

The water was agreeably cool. When he reached the beach the shining sand was agreeably warm. He put on his dripping disreputable, still shiny oxfords. The cracks were widening. He frowned at them with a glint of a question in his eyes. Then he straightened up.

"To think you might have thrown yourself away on a girl like that!" he muttered.

He strolled along, eyeing the tops of the distant houses with a brightly speculatively gaze. He did not look back at the *Carrie May*. The law, spurred by an outraged father, would be looking out for her.

"You wanted a passage south when you boarded the *Orranada*," he told himself. "You got it. And as for a stake—"

He moved on a trifle more rapidly, looking ahead with growing interest toward the rim of the horizon.

THE WEST WHEN IT WAS YOUNG by ELWELL

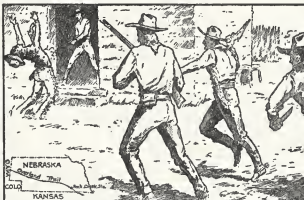
"WILD BILL" HICKOK. No 1



THE FRONTIER'S SIX-GUN KING CAME INTO THE WORLD IN 1838 ON A FARM IN ILLINOIS. WHEN 17 YEARS OLD HE HAD BUILT JAMES B. HICKOK INTO A 6-2" YOUTH, MOULDED NARROW HIPS AND GREAT SQUARE SHOULDERS. HE DECIDED THE OPEN SPACES WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI NEEDED HIM. THE WAY TO GET THERE—THE WAGON TRAIN. ON THE FARM HE COULD BARK SQUIRRELS AT 50 YARDS. CAME THE OPPORTUNITY TO USE THIS SKILL DEFENDING THE TRAIN HE HAD JOINED. REACHING FET LARAMIE, THE NEW PLAINSMAN HIRED OUT AS A FREIGHTER



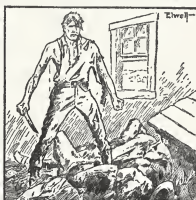
RESOURCEFULNESS WAS A HICKOK TRAIT. DRIVING A HERD OF OXEN ACROSS NEBRASKA, HICKOK'S CHARGES BECAME SO FOOT SORE THAT VOICE AND WHIP FAILED TO MOVE THEM. SO HE SEWED, WITH SINEW WET BUFFALO HIDE ON THEIR HOOF, THUS SAVING THEM THEIR DESTINATION.



HICKOK, AT 23 YEARS AND ASSISTANT MASTER AT ROCK CREEK STAGE STATION, FOUGHT ON JULY 12, 1861, THE MOST DESPERATE BATTLE AGAINST ODDS. THE FRONTIER EVER KNEW. TEN RUFFIANS WERE BENT ON STEALING THE STAGE COMPANY'S HORSES. HICKOK OBJECTED, SO THE DESPERADOES SET OUT TO CUT HIM DOWN. HIS GUN ROARED AND MCANDLES DROPPED.



THEN NINE OUTTHROATS CHARGED. HICKOK WHO BACKED INTO THE CABIN. A SECOND LATER HIS SIX-GUN ROARED, WHILE A FLASH FROM THE DOOR MADE HIM WATCH BUT AN OUTLAW FELL. FOUR TIMES MORE THE DEADLY SIX-GUN FLASHED AS OTHER GUNS BELCHED. NOW KNIFE AGAINST FOUR. IN DESPERATION THE TERRIBLY WOUNDED HICKOK LEAPED AT HIS OPPONENTS. MEN CURSED, SPAT RED, JABBED AND SHOT.



SOON ONE HUMAN SHRIEDED BRUTALKLY, HIS KNIFE DRIPPING BLOOD, THEN HIS TIED BODY FELL. HERE, HICKOK WAS FOUND—ONLY ONE OF ELEVEN ALIVE. 3 BULLET WOUNDS IN BACK—SHOT AND IS CUTS CRIPPLED HIM FOR MONTHS. THEN AFTER THE FRONTIER KNEW HIM AS "WILD BILL" © 1900



OLD JEP

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Cuss 'Em, Cowboy!" "A Little Practice," etc.

OLD JEP was out on "patrol" when he saw them coming: three men afoot, hurrying down Big Mountain by the zigzag trail that debouches finally into Old Jep Canyon, not a stone's throw from his cowsheds. It was that ominous hour of the mountains when dawn is the uncertain gray of Old Jep's whiskers, with sunrise still to come.

Old Jep crouched behind a stump and tested the light over the sights of his ancient, scabbard-rubbed .30-30, catching a bead on each of the hurrying but furtive, skulking figures in turn. It seemed to

give him a peculiar satisfaction to realize that he could pick them off, one at a time, like so many partridges from a log, if he wished, for he grinned a poorly toothed grin as he lowered the gun and continued his patrol.

Once, three years ago in August, Old Jep had hobbled out at daybreak to find the Mosker boys, Ed and Karl, trampling his meadow, gathering armfuls of blue fringed gentians from the marshy spots. Big lads by then, they did not run for the fence at sight of him as they had used to do when he'd caught them in there after grasshoppers for their fishing.

"Hi-dy, Jep," Karl had said when he came flourishing the rifle at them. "Reckon you don't mind us pickin' a few posies for our gals in town, do you?"

But Old Jep did mind—and said so vehemently.

"I told your pappy ten years ago I didn't want him nor no other Mosker settin' foot on my land! Now git!"

Under the threat of his cocked carbine they got, but they took the armloads of flowers with them across the double line of fence that stood like a barricade between Old Jep's land and his neighbor's; and they paused beyond the fence to jeer at him, daring him to shoot. Old Jep didn't shoot, but he followed as far as the fence, cursing them, and for a year or more afterwards Gus Mosker, their father, received regularly in his once-a-week mail, a bill for "\$2.00 damages picken flowers in my meadow." In his prosperous looking stone house half a mile down Old Jep Canyon, big, bluff, Gus Mosker had growled a little to his family about "a dang crazy fool that wouldn't keep peace with God himself for a neighbor," but he had laughed more—and ignored the scrawled weekly bills.

Now the boys, Ed and Karl, were gone. Off somewhere with jobs from which they returned only occasionally with lavish gifts for old Gus Mosker and his wife, living in lonely comfort so far up in the mountains.

But every morning, between the dawn and the sunrise, Old Jep was out, patrolling the double fenced boundary with the bandy, bowed legs and the battered saddle gun that he had kept from his trail driving days of forty years ago. At one point where the fence line crossed a low ridge Old Jep could see the kitchen windows of the Mosker place. Sometimes he paused there, watching, until he saw the slow smoke of the Mosker's morning fire begin to roll from the chimney; while down in the snug stone house Mrs. Mosker fell into the habit of glancing out each morn-

ing toward the ridge where Old Jep would pass.

"I see Old Jep's still able to get about," she would remark to her husband.

"Yeah," old Gus would grunt. "Mean-ness ain't fatal, is it?"

"I wonder if Old Jep's sick," Mrs. Mosker would say, those few mornings when she missed the familiar stooped figure beyond the fence. Gus Mosker would growl something like "supposin' he is?" But the next morning—and the next—they would watch a little more carefully, until the gray dawn light revealed Old Jep on patrol again. That was the extent of their neighboring.

WHEN Old Jep got back to the cabin this morning, the men he had seen on the trail were already inside his gate, coming slowly, all three abreast, toward the cabin. They stopped as Old Jep came toward them, the .30-30 cradled in the crook of his elbow. Jep saw that they wore "town clothes," their light, low-cut shoes scuffed and battered. Two had right hands jammed fistlike into the side pockets of their coats. The third, a squatty built, swarthy man in a grimy turtle necked sweater, carried something in a canvas case in his left, and held his right behind him.

Old Jep heard clipped, side-mouthed words pass between them as they awaited his approach, but did not understand them.

He saw clearly enough, however, that they were strangers, and that was enough. Old Jep had no quarrel with strangers. He enjoyed to the utmost those rare occasions when what he called "outsiders" happened to drop in on him. He liked to talk and he liked their inevitable praise of his cooking—to which he always replied:

"Hell's hinges! What ol' time cowboy ain't right salty with a skillet?"

Now, with hospitality grinning from ear to ear, he came forward to greet these three.

"Howdy, gentlemum," he said in that

twangy Texas drawl that had never left him. "Come in, come in, an' I'll stir up a smidgin of breakfast!"

They stared at him with ill-concealed surprise, still wary-eyed with suspicion. The stiff curved lines of their right arms ending in the bulge of pockets did not relax. They exchanged slanting glances.

"Better let 'im have it, Lip," growled the sweated man in a low tone. "He's stallin' for a break to swing that gun on us!"

"Pipe down!" The long-faced man with pendulous lower lip side-mouthed back at him. "We gotta eat, ain't we?"

Then he addressed Old Jep, his harsh nasal voice assuming an unaccustomed suavity:

"Fine! That's fine, Pop! We was huntin'—fishin', I mean—an' got on the wrong trail. Lost, see, an' we gotta get out to the highway. You got a car?"

Old Jep shook his head.

"I've got hosses an' a buckboard, though, that travels right peert. Come in, come in! Let's have us some breakfast first!"

"He's got *horses*, Lip!" The third man, sallow, hawknosed, slope-shouldered, pinch-chested, laughed without mirth. "We gotta go places—an' he's got *horses*! Can you beat it, Lip?"



"Pipe down!" said Lip. "Let's go in an' eat one of 'em!"

"What say?" queried Old Jep, who had not caught it all. But he did not pause for an answer when he saw they meant to come in. The run-down heels of his boots clumped agilely ahead of them. The grinning essence of hospitality, he held open the door.

"Walk right in, boys! It's jest an ol' boar's nest, but—"

"You first," said the man called Lip. "We might scare your wife, see?" He winked at his companions.

"My wife," chuckled Old Jep, leading them into a roomy kitchen clean and neat as a pin, "she died."

"Tough," said Lip with the air of making conversation. "Recent?"

"I dunno," Old Jep answered, "I never met her!"

THEN chuckling at his own joke, he went deftly at the business of cooking breakfast.

The three men ate like starving wolves. Old Jep tossed flapjacks happily and talked.

"No, gents, I ain't got no car, but I can hitch up the team an' git you out to the highway in five, six hours."

"Not so hot," said Lip, halting' his chewing for a moment to listen for possible sounds outside.

"Oh, no, it don't never git hot in this altitude," chattered Old Jep. "Fact, y'all better stop with me a spell here where it's cool. You could do some fishin' an'—that your rods an' tackle in the case there?"

Their bellies filling, the three men grinned.

"Well, you might call it a rod at that, eh, Slug?" The man called Lip nudged the man in the sweater.

"Hell," said the thin hawknosed one, "we gotta git outa here, Lip!"

"Shucks!" protested Old Jep. "Ain't nobody drops in on me but once in a coon's age. I got canned gooseberries. I'll make you some pies fer dinner. An' I got plenty beddin'. Y'-all better stay!"

Thanks, Pop," said Lip. "Maybe we will. Eh, Beak?"

The thin one shrugged.

"You're the boss, Lip. I could do with a little shut-eye myself."

Them's funny nicknames y'-all got," grinned Old Jep, curiosity getting the bet-

ter of him. "Ain't you got no names a feller can mister you by?"

"Not on fishin' trips, Pop," said Lip dryly.

"O. K., Lip!" Pop chuckled, as he rolled out pie dough.

"You're learnin', Pop!"

So they stayed, but they didn't go fishin'. By turns, two at a time, they slept. During his turn at guard Lip quizzed the old man again about a car.

"Well," admitted Old Jep reluctantly, "ol' Mosker down yonder's got one of the dang things. Them no-count whelps of his brung it to him. Stole it somewheres, like as not. But he's too tarnation mean to loan it to you. You stay the night, an' tomorrow I'll hitch up the buckboard an' take you in."

"Like hell!" said Lip, under his breath. Aloud he said, "Tough customer is he, this Whatzizname?"

"Oh, he ain't as tough as he makes out! Me an' him locked horns over a little ditch matter more'n a dozen years ago, an' I warned him never to set foot on my land agin—an' he ain't never had the guts to do it, neither! Takes the long trail around when he rides up Big Mountain, rather'n risk it. Nossir, jest fergit about ol' Mosker an' his car. Come time you got to go, I'll hitch up the buckboard!"

"Ain't pals with this Mosker, eh?"

"None to speak of," said Old Jep dryly. "You better holler up your pardners. The chuck's about on."

LIP sat cocked back in a rawhide chair, picking his teeth.

"Nice quiet place," he remarked. "No-body droppin' in. Ain't bad, eh, Beak?"

"It's bad anywheres," whined Beak, "without a bus. Supposin' some of these hick bulls—"

"Pipe down! We'll grab a bus O. K. when the time comes."

"Hey, Lip! Slug jerked his head, scowling over a newspaper. "Take a squint at dis!"

On the front page of the *Mora County Weekly News*, under black headlines were the pictures of three men—pictures with numbers on them.

GANGSTERS AT LARGE IN MOUNTAINS

Frank (Lip) Anton and Two Ex-Convict Companions Abandon Car West of Mora When Crowded By Sheriff Lopez and Posse. Trio Wanted in Oklahoma For Bank Stick-Ups and Murder.

"Residents of isolated farms and ranches in the Big Mountain district are warned to lock their houses, garages and particularly to take the keys out of their cars. Three wanted men, cold blooded killers, are afoot somewhere in the Big Mountain wilderness and it is believed that hunger will force them into some settlement, probably north of Old Jep Canyon, within a week if officers do not catch them first. The desperadoes, according to Sheriff Lopez, are city-bred gangsters whose whole hope of escape will depend upon stealing a car. They will not hesitate to kill in cold blood, he said, to obtain one. Mountain residents are warned to go armed at all times, and—"

Old Jep appeared from pattering in the pantry.

"Oh," he grinned genially, "you found the newspaper. Got it when I rode for the mail yesterday, but jest hadn't got around to openin' it yet. I aimed to tell you it was there in case—"

He broke off suddenly as Slug crumpled the paper into a wad in his thick fingers and stepped over to the stove. He had the lid lifter in his hand when Old Jep grabbed his arm.

"Hey!" the little old man shrilled. "I ain't read that paper yet myownself!"

"So what?" grunted Slug, lifting the lid.

Old Jep's claw-like hands made a grab for the wadded paper as the flames licked at it.

DELIBERATELY Slug rammed the stove lifter against the old man's belly and shoved. The little stove roared suddenly as its swift draft flamed the fresh fuel. Old Jep sat on the floor, batting his pale eyes.

"You're a damn fool, Slug!" snapped Lip and stooped to help the old man up. Like a squirrel Old Jep evaded him and scrambled toward the battered .30-30 standing in a corner. He whirled, the carbine at his shoulder. The hammer clicked back under his thumb.

"Now git!" he said. "Git out of my house!"

Slug stood by the stove, one hand on the butt of an automatic snugged under his sweater. The thin one called Beak grinned. Lip sat down on the table edge, started awkwardly but calmly rolling a smoke from Old Jep's makings.

"We like it here, Pop," he said. "You're a damn swell cook!"

"An' a better shot!" said Old Jep grimly. "Like it here or not, that there was my newspaper, an' I won't stand for such! I'm goin' to count you ten to git out—"

"Make it three an' save your wind," said Lip dryly. "Your gun ain't loaded, Pop."

Swiftly Old Jep levered the .30-30, saw that both chamber and magazine were empty.

Old Jep was angry, but he was nobody's fool. Those pocket bulges were guns—a fact which had not concerned him until now, for he was of a generation when men went armed, and he still looked upon the practice as every man's right. His eye had caught the words "gangsters at large" in black headline as Slug crammed the paper into the stove. He had read some about these modern gangsters lately, telling himself that what they needed was a liberal dose of the old-time, gunfighting cowboy. No guts. He recalled that a little weekly sheet like the *Mora County News* never headlined items that were not of especial local interest. The truth clicked suddenly in his brain. But, gangsters or not, these

men had abused his hospitality, trespassed on his personal rights in burning that paper before he had read it. That, more than being shoved to the floor, was the source of his wrath. He stood for a moment undecided.

From over Frank Anton's slack, drooping lower lip, came words at once quiet, conciliating—and hard.

"Take it easy, Pop. You ain't got a chance. I unloaded your musket while you was bakin' pies. Guys like us—we never know how things'll break, see?"

"Damn right we don't!" broke in Slug. "I'm gonna let 'im have it, Lip!"

"You pipe down!" said Lip with cold authority. "You're out in the sticks now, remember, where anybody hears a shot he knows it ain't a backfire. Wait'll we got a bus to park our fannies in. Be time enough for blastin' then!" He addressed Old Jep again. "Slug'll scrub up the dishes, Pop, for slammin' yuh. Set down an' take yourself easy."

Old Jep set the carbine back in the corner. The faintest hint of a crafty gleam lighted his pale eyes for a moment, then vanished.

"Got no time to set," he growled. "Got chores to do—outside. You want ol' Mosker to hear my cows bellerin' an' come snoopin' around to see how come I ain't watered 'em?"

"Ain't so dumb, are you, Pop?" grinned Lip. "I'll go out with you, an' if this Mosker gets nosy—" he patted the gunbulge of his pocket meaningly.

"Listen, Lip," whined Beak. "T'hell with dishwashin'! We gotta git outa here. Maybe this Mosker bird's got a bus we can grab an'—"

"He has," said Lip, "an' we're gonna grab it—when the time comes. Right now—git at them dishes!"

Old Jep grinned crookedly, cryptically as they went out.

Twice while he watched Old Jep move about spryly at his chores, Lip Anton fingered his automatic speculatively. If Old

Jep suspected how near he was to sudden death, he gave no sign of it.

When they came back in the house the canvas case lay open on the table and Slug was cleaning a tommy gun.

"In case this Mosker guy tries to balk on *loanin'* his car!" he grinned. "This baby don't miss!"

"We better git goin', Lip," said the thin one coughing.

"Maybe Pop will invite us for supper," said Lip. "One more meal under our belts wouldn't hurt nothin'. Eh, Pop?"

"Sure," said Old Jep. "Oh, sure."

HE got supper in silence, grim-lipped, aware that his every move was watched.

He saw Slug rummage his pantry at Lip's direction, packing a generous food supply in sacks, and said nothing.

Then, when they had eaten and shoved back their chairs, Old Jep cleared his throat.

"Fellers," he twanged, "it ain't none of my business, but I take it you're on the dodge, ain't you?"

"He's smart," grinned Beak.

"Not to where it aches me," Old Jep went on dryly. "But I ain't goin' to set here an' let you fellers go bustin' down to ol' Mosker's to steal his car!"

"Yeah?" Slug reached across the table, seized the old man by the shirt collar, twisted it up until it choked him. "How you gonna stop us?"

"Lay off him, Slug," said Lip coldly. Then to Old Jep, "Hell, I thought you hated this Mosker guy's guts, Pop?"

"You thought right," gulped Old Jep grimly. "That's how come me puttin' in my little two cents thisaway. Whatever it

was about you fellers in that paper that ol' Blunt-Nose here, burnt up—well, ol' Mosker takes the same paper. An' if I know the ol' buzzard like I figger I do, he'll be locked up tight as a drum an hour before dark, an' he'll be on the lookout, loaded for bear! He'll pump you full o'

buckshot before you even git the garage open!"

"Hell, Pop!" Lip Anton laughed. "He won't have a chance! We'll stop out in the dark an' call him out, ask about the road or somepun innocent, see? An' the second he shows, Slug'll open up the tommy an' cut him down! Just as a favor to you, Pop!"

"But the ol' lady—" Jep began.

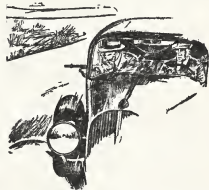
"Slug's baby spits through petticoats an' corsets, same as pants an' shirts," said Beak.

"Sure," Old Jep nodded. "But that ain't what I mean. I mean the ol' lady's got ears as keen as a mustang's. An' seem like she's always listenin'. Ever' time I come by there after dark, even afoot, this ol' gal hears me, an' they switch on the light till I git past. An' they—"

"Fine!" Lip broke in. "With a light in the window, an' us out in the dark—"

"You won't be in no dark," Old Jep broke in grimly. "This light's right out over the garage. They got one of these here electric plants, an' they switch it on from the house. It's as big as the moon an' lights up the whole dang place!"

"The hell!"



"That's right, an' with ol' Mosker layin' the barrel of his shotgun out through a plumb dark winder, he can cut you down like rabbits—an' don't think he won't do it, neither! Nossir, y'all goin' to borry ol' Mosker's car thataway, you got to do it in daylight!"

"Cripes!" Beak jerked nervously from his chair. "It ain't clean dark yet, Lip! Let's git goin' before—"

Somehow Old Jep slid between him and the door, turned the key in it and faced them. Beak's shaky hand dived to the gun in his coat pocket, but Old Jep seemed not to notice the threat of it.

"Dammit, fellers!" he cried. "Ain't I been waitin' for years to ketch ol' Mosker with his pants down? An' you got to play right into his hands! Cain't you listen to me a minute? Wait till mornin' an' I'll rig it so you can help yourselves to ol' Mosker's damn autymobile an' he won't never even know it till you're plumb gone! Hell, fellers—"

"Set down, Beak," said Lip, scowling. "Set down, Pop, we're listenin'—an' it better be good!"

IN THE gray of dawn the next morning Mrs. Mosker lit the kerosene lamp over her kitchen stove, paused as she passed the west window and peered out. But the light was still too gray and shadowy to see far.

"Looks like we're up ahead of Ol' Jep this mornin'," she remarked as her husband sat down before the fire to lace his shoes. "You goin' for the mail right after breakfast?"

"Sure," grunted Mosker, yawning pleasantly. "Ain't that what you got me up so early for?"

"Well," said the kindly faced old lady, starting to mix biscuits, "a body does get hungry for the news. You ought to have gone day before yesterday, while it'd still be fresh."

"Ain't no news but what'll keep, I reckon, Marthy. An' I wanted to get them logs hauled in."

When Mrs. Mosker got up for their second cup of coffee, she stepped over past the window. It was lighter now.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "Yonder's Old Jep an'—"

The distant slap of a rifle shot inter-

rupted her. Near the window a bullet spatted against the stone wall, and in a second another, as Mosker's big arms lifted his wife bodily away from the window. But he stood there himself, peering out.

Up on the ridge beyond the double fence, silhouetted in the salmon-tinted light of the coming sun, he saw Old Jep, rifle at his shoulder. Again the report of it slapped crisply on the morning air, and the bullet whined off the stone wall. Old Jep waved the gun tauntingly and suddenly vanished. Puzzled, Mosker saw now that a panel of the double-fence was gapped, and in another jiffy there was Old Jep again, driving a little bunch—fifteen or twenty—of his spotted cattle through it into the Mosker fields.

"Marthy," said Mosker, and his voice no longer sounded kindly, "Old Jep's shovin' his stock into my seed oats. Fetch me my shot gun! I'll have to go drive 'em out!"

White lipped, she brought a dusty shotgun from a closet, but when she could find only two shells for it, Mosker would not wait for more.

"Lordy, look how they're tromplin' that field! I'll go up by the north draw, Marthy, an' see if I can run 'em out before they tromple the whole patch down! You—"

"I'm goin' with you, Pa. You can't drive 'em out alone, an'—an' I don't want there to be no shootin'!"

"There's li'ble to be, this time. You stay here, Marthy!"

But Gus Mosker knew his wife. When she came on after him anyway, he paused a moment for her to catch up.

IN a chokecherry clump near where the fence had been gapped, the squatty man called Slug knelt with his "tommy gun" trained on Old Jep. It had been trained on him all the time.

"An' if you try usin' 'em for anything but to get attention at the house," Lip had

told him when he returned him three of his own shells for the .30-30, "Slug'll mow you down so quick you'll splatter in your own face!"

But Old Jep had only grinned. Now he grinned even wider as he came from his own hiding in another cherry clump.

"Told you it'd work!" he exclaimed. "They buzzed right out! Comin' around by the north draw, hellbent to run them cows out! Him an' the ol' woman both! We better hump our tails!"

Slug and Old Jep overtook Lip and Beak already out in the road, loaded with sacks of provisions, ready for the dash.

"It clicked!" panted Slug. "Let's git goin'!"

Beak and Lip shifted part of their burden to Old Jep, and like so many scurrying animals they ran down the twisting road that follows the main draw of Old Jep Canyon, well out of sight of the north draw and Mosker's seed-oats field, now spotted with the scattering cattle.

They came panting, Lip in the lead, Old Jep next, to the front of Gus Mosker's house—and there stood the car, neither housed nor locked, with the ignition key in the switch. It was a two year old model, but well kept. The motor answered at once, and smoothly, when Lip stepped on the starter.

Beak threw in the sacks and piled swiftly in the rear seat. Slug, tommy gun in hand, stood behind Old Jep, glancing questioningly at Lip in the car, and back to Jep again.

"Shall I let 'im have it, Lip?" he spoke softly.

Old Jep grinned and spat.

"Hell," he said dryly, "I wouldn't know what to do with the damn thing if yuh did!" And before Lip could answer, he climbed gingerly into the front seat beside him.

"Well, you got the car," he offered, "but you ain't outa the woods yet. There's two roads, one a heap shorter'n the other an' not so li'ble to meet anybody. I'll go

'long an' show you which 'un to take." He paused to chuckle. "Never did ride in one of these things anyhow. I'd kinder like the ride! I won't mind walkin' back!"

"Sure, sure," said Lip. "We'll take you for a ride, all right, Pop. Git in, Slug!" He pulled up his big lower lip with his teeth and turned to wink at Beak.

EXPERTLY, without any undue noise, Lip Anton let in the clutch and the sedan rolled down the road.

Within a quarter of a mile the road forked. The older, more rutted branch followed down-canyon to the left. The other slanted out along a high bench to the southward, away from the canyon. Tire tracks showed on both.

"Take the right," advised Old Jep. "It's rough in spots, but it heads straighter towards the highway, an' it's a heap shorter."

As Lip wheel-jerked the car into the right hand road and slammed into second for the slanting climb, Old Jep's rough, knotty fingers explored the polished molding of the door.

"Give ol' Mosker fits to know I was ridin' in this here chariot of his!" he chuckled.

"What'll he do?" Lip spoke sharply.

"Him? Shucks, he won't git them cows run out for another hour, anyways!"

It was tough driving, as most New Mexico mountain roads are, and it kept Lip's eyes straight ahead. In the rear seat the squat man in the sweater kept his eyes on the back of Old Jep's head, one hand on the automatic in his lap. At intervals Beak turned to glance searchingly out the back window. City men, they were, accustomed to streets and highways. The roadside itself passed without their notice.

But Old Jep, forty years in these mountains, saw everything. Here above the road was a scarred little flat—a loading skidway from which Gus Mosker had already hauled all the logs. Yonder an-

other, with half a dozen logs left. Yonder, below the road, the russet trunk of a big pine log lay lodged athwart the saplings of a thicket, where it had crashed when old Mosker let it get away from him on the loading bench.

A mile, two miles without talk. The road grew rougher, less used. It topped a ridge and slanted around into the cove of another canyon, slanted steeply out again. Yonder, halfway up this narrow bench lay a great pile of pine logs just above the rocky, rutted road. A skid wedged under the bottom log at the lower side served to hold them back. To the left the slope dropped off even more abruptly, its sandstone slant almost a precipice.

BEAK reached forward and nudged the driver gently. Almost imperceptibly Lip nodded. In low gear he jounced the car steeply up over chunky earth-ribs of sandstone. Suddenly he braked, jerked to a stop. He chin-pointed at a clutter of big rocks directly ahead in the road.

"We'll smash the crankcase on them stones," he said. "Better climb out, Pop, an' heave 'em away!"

"Sure," said Old Jep, and climbed out.

Lip spoke without turning, the words edging from the corner of his mouth in a tone too low for Old Jep to hear.

"When he starts to climb back in, Slug," he said, "let 'im have it!"

Slug grunted answer.

Out in front of the car Old Jep stooped over the big stones, heaved at one.

"This 'un seems kinder solid," he said. He stooped still lower over it.

Suddenly, swift as the spring of a bow, he straightened, a big rock in each hand. The first crashed the windshield directly over the wheel, showering Lip's face before he could duck, with a thousand little glass arrows. The second crashed through after it, thumping the dazed man's head so hard it bounced.

A gun barked from the rear seat. The bullet spattered more glass, whined off

from the radiator cap, not a foot above the bent crouch of Old Jep's back.

In the front seat, Lip slumped under the wheel. The clutch jerked in, yanked the car violently, throwing Slug heavily to the ground as he scrambled out the right rear door. Then, with only the worn emergency brake to hold it, the car started to bump slowly backward, held in the road by the ruts.

Old Jep's first throw at Slug missed, but the second caught the burly man on the chest as he came up from his hands and knees.

Beak leaped from the car on the lower side, snarled himself in a scrub oak clump, but somehow snagged out of it and came up shooting. Old Jep reached frantically for more rocks, found nothing but small ones, hurled once, ducked behind the slowly retreating radiator as bullets whined from the left fender. He felt his hat jerked from his head, a nip like the sharp slash of a fang along his thigh. He hurled one more rock, then whirled and ran, crouched and zigzagging like a shot-at-wolf, for the ramp of piled logs.

Slug should have had him then, at point blank range, but the gangster had emptied his automatic, and was running at the side of the backing car, clawing to retrieve his machine gun from the rear seat.

Bullets from Beak's automatic spatted close, but Old Jep felt himself chuckling inwardly. It was just as he had always thought; these yellow skunks had to jab the muzzle into a man's belly or cut loose with a machine gun before they could hit the broadside of hell!

Old Jep reached the end of the log pile where the skid-wedge was, and stopped to look back. Slug had his tommy gun now, panting up the road for point blank range to fire it.

"Come on, you yaller guts!" Old Jep yelled. "Come on, an' git me!"

He waved the canthook Gus Mosker had left lying on the skidway, daring them to come.

Beak clambered up into the road, shoving in a clip.

"Burn 'im down, Slug!" he yelled.

Slug stopped to kneel deliberately with the Tommy gun.

Old Jep slapped the canthook onto the wedge skid, gave it a yank, then leaped and threw himself behind a nearbystump, as the tattoo of the machine gun began.

With the holding wedge gone the logs began slowly to move—so slowly that the men in the road did not see them at first.

Then with the low but ominous boom of timber against timber, the great ramp of pine logs came tumbling into the road, almost at the instant that somewhere farther down Gus Mosker's sedan backed with a dull crash into a tree and stopped.

WITH a wild yell Beak leaped to escape them. The end of a swerving butt log struck him. It broke his thigh, but knocked him free of the rest. The slower Slug, with ironical and obstinate faith in his "typewriter," saw the logs too late. When they had crashed and jammed to a stop, what was left of him and his Tommy gun lay under them in the road.

Lip Anton was just coming to when Old Jep got to the car. Grimly Old Jep dragged him out, took his gun.

"This road don't go no further'n the next log-pile, feller," he said. "Reckon you kin drive this contraption back—or yuh want me to finish the chapter right here?"

Somehow, after a while, by using an empty loading spot to turn on, Lip got the car turned around, his own gun jammed in his ribs the while. Cursing, but obedient, he helped Beak to it and loaded him in.

"O. K., Lip," said Old Jep, side-mouthing the words in perfect imitation of his erstwhile guests. "Let's git goin'!"

It was a funny thing, then, but it was like Old Jep at that. A quarter from the road forks he saw Gus Mosker, and two of the county sheriff's men with him, coming in another car.

"Wup! Stop 'er!" said Old Jep. And when Lip Anton obeyed Old Jep hit him with the gun butt, left him slumped under the wheel and took to the woods.

LIP ANTON was a prisoner in truth when he came to again, in front of Mosker's house.

"You're damned lucky, Gus," Deputy Ance Millwee was saying to Mosker, "that you wasn't here when they come for the car. They'd of mowed you down in cold blood—an' your wife with you!"

Lip Anton broke his surly silence.

"The damned old rat!" he snarled. "He gabbed us out of it! We'd of grabbed it last night in the dark, but—hell!" He stared up over Mosker's garage. "Hell! I don't see no electric light out here!"

"Why," said Old Gus Mosker, "what made you think there was?"

Bitterly, Lip Anton told him.

"Mother," said Gus Mosker soberly, "Old Jep turned them cows through a-purpose, to get us away from here an' save us from—from"

"I know, Gus! Maybe you an' Ance better run up an' see if he's home yet! He may be hurt—an' need lookin' after."

Old Jep was home all right. He came out to the gate, limping a little, his battered .30-30 cradled on his arm.

"Howdy, Ance," he greeted the deputy. "When you come in better company, I'll ask yuh in!"

"Here's the stuff of yours they stole," began Gus Mosker, "an' Jep, I want to tell you—"

"You cain't tell me nothin,' Mosker!" Old Jep broke in, bristling. "I'll tote in them sacks. Jest mind you keep off'n my place, that's all!"

"I'll be danged!" said Gus Mosker and climbed back in Millwee's car.

It was not too far for him to see, as Ance turned the car to drive away, that Old Jep was chucking as he set his .30-30 against the fence and came out to pick up the sacks.

**Coming in
the next**

Short Stories

*A novel-length story of Sad Sontag—still
looking for trouble*

Gunsmoke and the Golden Eagles
by
W. C. TUTTLE



**The Mysterious Disappearance
of the Two Magicians**
by **H. BEDFORD-JONES**



**PANTHER
RUN**
**Clifford
Sweet**

**HE DID AS
MONKEY DOES**
A. A. Caffrey



**TRADE
DISHES**
**Captain
Fred
Moore**

Adventurers All



Talking of Tide Rips!

IN June of 1896 I left Vancouver with a mate, to try my hand at salmon fishing at Rivers Inlet on Queen Charlotte Sound, British Columbia.

The cannery was several miles up the Inlet and about 350 miles north of Vancouver.

We sailed from Vancouver on the *Barbara Boscovitz*, a solid built old tub, originally a sailing craft, but fitted with steam for motive power. Having left a homestead on the Northwest Canadian prairie, in what was then the Province of Assiniboia and now styled Saskatchewan, with a background of turning prairie sod with oxen and a foot-burner plow, the trip from Vancouver was more than a novelty to me. The old *Boscovitz* smelled like a garbage wagon, on account of the accumulated odors of possibly one hundred years as a sealer in Bering Sea under Russian ownership.

We tied up to the cannery wharf on the Inlet about 2 A. M. of a Sunday morning. I preempted a bunk on a scow, fitted up for sleeping quarters, to be awakened about 10 A. M. by—of all things—a brass band playing hymns in the cannery building. So up I went to look-see, and found a corps of Siwashes, in Salvation Army rig, singing hymns, praying, and giving their religious experiences, all in the Chinook jargon. Chinook is a language, or jargon, compiled by a Catholic priest, which was used by whites and natives from the Gulf of California to the Arctic.

Just before the fish run started a strike

was called. No agreement was arrived at, and in company with sixteen other men, two of whom were the owners of a six ton cutter, sail was set for the return to Vancouver. We carried a fair wind with us and were booming along at a good pace, when, just north of Alert Bay, on the Inside Passage between Vancouver Island and the mainland, we saw a large black object head for us. One of the owners of the boat hollered, "Here comes that damned blackfish!" and gave us his record as a bad actor.

It seems Mr. Blackfish had upset more than one Siwash canoe and mangled up some of the Siwashes. A 45-70 Winchester was passed to a Naval Reserve man who let the blackfish come within about 100 feet and let it have two or three between the eyes. That was all possible, as the blackfish dived and nothing more was seen of it. It looked to be about 30 feet long and about three feet of his bulk was above the surface.

WE had more to come by way of excitement. On the third night out we anchored in Canoe Bay just north of the Seymour Narrows. It was our custom to anchor every night as the Inside passage was tricky, risky water to navigate even in daylight. The Seymour Narrows were not to be treated lightly. Most of the steamboats tackled them at slack water period only, the three-fourths hour after full ebb or full flood tide. At times there was an eight knot current. The

tide runs in and out around both the north and south ends of Vancouver Island, meeting a few miles below the Seymour Narrows at Cape Mudge. After consulting watches and tide tables, anchor was had up and with four men at each of four large sweeps we put out with yours truly at the tiller, instructed to steer close to the east shore as possible. The intention was to buck in against the last of the ebb tide, which we took it for granted we were doing, as driftwood and snags were to be seen moving North, on the west side. As a matter of fact, the flood tide was about two hours run, booming down the center of the Narrows, still as glass, to strike the shore of the Island, eddying both to east and west. Our course was to turn east in the throat of the narrows. We did, and found the cutter going round and round in a monster whirlpool, but on the outer edge of it. Mention was made of taking to the punt we had in tow. It held four men. A farmer on the shore to the east of us saw our predicament, hustled along shore until close to us as we swept around, and said, "Get out into the main current if you can." After circling around several times on the outer edge of the whirl-

pool, by some vagary of water in violent motion, and with a flattening out of the whirlpool, aided by the men at the sweeps, we gained the main current which took hold and shot us out of a bad fix at a lively pace. The run of the tide took us in a hurry to where the tides met a few miles below at Cape Mudge. Talk about tide rips, there is where we got our money's worth; One day short of reaching Vancouver we remained at anchor all of one morning, no wind, and watched a whale battling one or more blackfish, about one-quarter mile off shore for several hours.

Making several trips up and down Seymour Narrows later I got a line on them. Some years previously a bunch of Siwashes, some Haidas and some Simo-chans, either in a spirit of tribal rivalry, on a bet, or under the influence of pia-watch—booze—manned two twelve-man dugouts and tackled the Seymour Narrows. Rumor had it that none of them were ever seen again. I have still clearly in mind the picture of saw logs and monster snags disappearing in that whirlpool to be shot up maybe one-fourth mile below.

Harry Penhallurick.

\$15 For True Adventures

U*NDER the heading Adventurers All, the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid \$15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE



IN THIS issue we begin a new Hendryx serial of the North. In it is the story of a conflict, not a physical one, but one between the white blood and the red which flowed in the veins of the stalwart young son of a Northern trader. The story has all the color that his readers have been wont to look for in a Hendryx yarn, all the excitement, and above all that very human element of adventure, which Mr. Hendryx knows so well how to introduce into his tales. In this connection we print here an interesting letter which came to us not long ago. It is from a former inspector of Constabulary in the Philippines:

"Recently I read a story in **SHORT STORIES** by James B. Hendryx. In it there was an incident of an Eskimo shooting a surveyor because of the belief that the latter's transit was a machine gun, and that, when it was set up and pointed toward the Eskimo's tent, the surveyor intended to open fire. This perhaps seemed a bit far fetched, but an incident almost identical in character occurred in Mindanao nearly thirty years ago. A geologist, operating in Mindanao went into the hills separating the Lanao District from the Agusan River Valley. Then nothing more was heard from him.

"The hills were populated by a people called 'Montercos.' They were the descendants of those driven either from the

Moro Provinces or from the Agusan Valley—generally for good cause. Their reputation was bad.

"Several attempts to penetrate the hills in search of the geologist failed, due to the fear of the lowland peoples. Bearers would desert when the foot hills were reached.

"A constabulary officer named Atkins came to the district. After studying the situation, he organized a party and renewed the attempt. He succeeded in penetrating the mountains and, with about twenty soldiers, was making his way up a draw when smoke began to overtake the party from the rear. Atkins, realizing that the brush had been fired below them, and that the draw was acting as a chimney, at once started a fire himself. He halted his troops, beating out the flames near them, then, when the fire had advanced a few hundred yards, sent several men ahead to lie down as if overcome by flames. The balance of his force he disposed on the slopes of the ravine in rocky places the fire from below could not reach.

"Soon the flames from below came to the point fired by Atkins; they died out there, but Atkins' fire continued to mount the draw. Under Atkins' direction, his men shouted for a few minutes then were silent.

"Half an hour passed. Then they could

see the Montercos creeping up the draw. There was quite a band of them armed with spears and a few rifles and pistols. They paused below Atkins' concealed groups, pointing excitedly at the constabulary men lying on the ground from fifty to a hundred yards up the draw. After some chattering they started forward. Then Atkins had his bugler sound 'Attention.' The seemingly dead soldiers sprang up and covered the Montercos with their rifles. The parties which had been hidden on the flanking slopes did likewise. The Montercos were trapped, and, on command of a soldier who spoke their language, surrendered.

"Atkins then told what he had come for, assuring them that no harm would be done them. The Monterco leader then told the story.

"Yes, he said, a lone white man had come to the mountains several moons past. He was unarmed so they had welcomed and fed him and given him shelter. But the next day they found him to be

treacherous. They trailed him when he had left after breakfast and saw him gathering fragments of rock which he hid in a large bag. They knew then that he meant to attack them that night when they were asleep, breaking their heads with the stones. So that evening, when he was eating, one native stole behind him with a great stone and did to him what they felt he intended to do to them.

"The similarity of psychology of the Northern story and this actual incident seemed worth bringing to your attention. Fortunately, under the Spanish Penal Code—still in operation in the Philippines at the time—it was no more difficult to have the killing pardoned, than, by inference, it was to have the Eskimo in the Hendryx story.

"If you feel this will interest your readers, please pass it along.

"Very Sincerely,

"C. E. Kilburne,

"Former Inspector for Constabulary,

"Philippine Islands."

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

Soap from Locusts

EVEN a locust is good for something, it seems. The locust swarms are still one of the worst plagues that afflict the peoples of Africa and Asia Minor but according to an announcement from abroad they have found at least one way to make use of them and, to a certain extent, make up for the loss they cause. The natives of some districts eat the insects, of course, but it has been found that the locust oil makes a fairly good soap. The insects are



gathered in as large quantities as possible and dried in the sun. Then they are treated with a solvent that dissolves and removes all the fats and oils from their bodies. After being purified with steam, this locust oil is ready for use in the soap factory.

What Is an Accident?

THE United States government's definition of an aircraft accident is "an occurrence which takes place while an air-

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craft is being operated as such, as a result of which a person or persons are injured or killed or the aircraft receives appreciable or marked damage as a result of a failure of the aircraft structure or engine or through forces of external contact, or through fire."

Under the government's method of accident analysis, accident causes are divided under three main heads. These are personnel, material and miscellaneous. Under its definition there were twenty-six accidents during the first six months of 1937.

Under a "miscellaneous" subhead the accident board found that the majority of accidents, 23.4 percent, was due to bad weather during the first half of this year.

The second greatest cause was personnel error. To this was attributed the cause of 21.3 percent.

The third major cause was attributed to "airport and terrain." Under this classification came 16.3 percent.

In 11 percent of the accidents the cause was officially reported to be "unknown and doubtful."

Under material failures the investigating board found landing gears were principally at fault.

What is called power plant failures accounted for 3.8 percent of the accidents and these were attributed to "propellers and accessories." There were other less prominent causes.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB

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How about exchanging "Pipe Dream Wanderings" with this member?

Dear Secretary:

When I was a youngster the stories I read in *SHORT STORIES* gave me the wanderlust. For over six years I wandered to many countries and took my share of adventure on the high seas and various ports as radio operator in the merchant marine.

Now that I am settled down to one small sector of the globe I continue to travel the highroads of adventure through the flowing pen of many of your fine authors. Many a thrill comes from settings which I have seen and known. *SHORT STORIES* is as necessary to me as the air I breathe.



I would like to extend my "pipe dream wanderings" with philatelic readers in all corners of the earth. Those of your readers who wish to exchange postage stamps shall find fertile trading grounds at this address.

I will appreciate a membership-identification card at your convenience.

Very truly yours,

P. E. Miller

P. O. Box 379,
Plattsburg, New York.

Here's a real honest-to-goodness Brazilian who writes:

Dear Secretary:

I would appreciate it very much if you would consider my application for mem-

bership in the Ends of the Earth Club.

I am a Brazilian, and have been a reader of the *SHORT STORIES* magazine for a long time. I have met here several fellows who are members of your club, and who have shown me letters that they have received from their pen pals from different countries and I am anxious to be a member of that great club.

I like to correspond and find it very interesting, so please enroll me as soon as you can.

I shall be very proud of my membership card.

Thanking you very kindly and I remain

Respectfully yours,

Waldemar da Silveira

Rua Oscar Porto, 281,

S. Paulo, Brazil.

SAVE THESE LISTS!

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy *SHORT STORIES* because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club Members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and address will appear only once.

Rex LeMoine, P. O. Box 196, Veterans Home, Napa County, Calif.

Fred. A. Lake, Jr., 42 Hazelton Street, Gardiner, Maine
Rerebami I. Lawani, St. Georges School, Ekwanganga-Opobo, Nigeria, West Africa

E. S. Lawton, Casilla 12, Cunaco, Chile, S. A.
H. Lebensfeld, 557 Warwick Street, Brooklyn, New York
Carlos Liebhaber, c/o Postmaster, Buenos Aires de Osa, Costa Rica

Louis Maciejewski, 1349 Fremont Place, Elizabeth, N. J.
Edward A. Macklin, New Pioneer Hotel, 151 N. E. First Street, Miami, Fla.

Robert MacDonald, 73 West 101st Street, New York
Robert P. Mabone, 5112 Sheridan Road, Chicago, Ill.
Gen Main, CCC Co. 2950, Camp Lompoc SCS-9, Lompoc, Calif.

J. N. T. Mapokin, St. Thomas School, Azumini Town, Via Abu, Nigeria, West Africa

Sandy McIntosh, Plenty, Saskatchewan, Canada
Maurice L. McLean, Station Hospital, Fort Ethan Allen, Vt.

Daniel Martin, 6701 East End Avenue, Chicago, Ill.
Donald Mason, 246 16th Street, Renova, Penna.

H. Masten, 5th Engt. Silveville, c/o Gen. Steamship Corp. Ltd., 240 Battery Street, San Francisco, Calif.

James P. Mealy, 2838 Ruth Street, Philadelphia, Penna.
H. Mullins, 318 Bernard Street, Rochester, N. Y.

Ebenezer U. J. Member, Government School, Owerri, Nigeria, West Africa

To People Who Want to Write but can't get started

Do you have the constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance?

Then listen to what Fulton Oursler, editor of *Liberty*, has to say on the subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today—and especially in *Liberty Magazine*—than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling, and many others whose work we have published? It is also true that more people are trying to write than ever before, but talent is still rare and the writer still must learn his craft, as few of the newcomers nowadays seem willing to do. Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."



"I am able to live on the money I earn by writing, and it is not yet ten months since I began the course! Until a few months after beginning study with you I had never had a line published. What more can I say for a course which has enabled me to earn a livelihood by the most congenial work I have ever done?"—John N. Ottum, Jr., Box 95, Lisbon, N. D.

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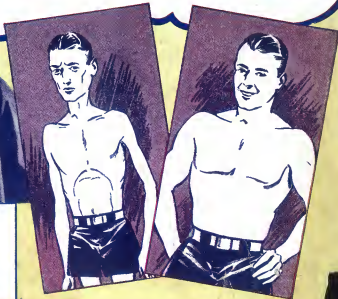
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